

# **‘Post-Writing’: God and Textuality in Derrida’s Later Work**

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Danielle Sands, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

## Abstract

This thesis addresses the controversial question of a religious or theological ‘turn’ in Derrida’s later work. Emphasising both the consistency of Derrida’s work and the significance of mode and genre, I consider Derrida’s atheistic rethinking of God, investigating the way that the relationship between God and writing determines the configuration of ethics, politics and religion in his later work. The thesis consists of four chapters, each focusing on a different mode of discourse. The first chapter, Confession, tracks Derrida’s ‘double reading’ in ‘Circumfession’, arguing that it both subverts the constitutive economies of structure, subject and God, and itself confesses deconstruction’s alliance with an ‘athetic writing’ which rethinks God and subjectivity through non-identity. The chapter briefly turns to ‘Envois’ to consider the political implications of confession.

Chapters Two and Three address the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology. The first of these, Dialogue, argues that the dialogical mode defines deconstruction, ensuring consistency between Derrida’s early and later work and refuting claims of a ‘turn’. Reading ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’, I argue that the dialogical nature of the text enables a ‘post-writing’ which articulates non-ontotheological conceptions of God and gestures towards the political implications of deconstruction. The third chapter, Silence, explores the link between God and language, arguing that Derrida espouses a relativistic or linguistic silence as a way of bearing witness to a linguistic God, and noting, however, a residual tension in Derrida’s work between the singularity of religious commitment and the universality of ethics.

The last chapter, Reason, reads ‘Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’, analysing both the interdependence of reason and religion, and the ‘Enlightenment to come’, and arguing that the text’s neglect of the question of God creates a tension between the private and the public or political. Assessing Richard Rorty’s depiction of this tension, I argue that by connecting democracy and public space with singularity and secrecy, Derrida’s conception of literature challenges this dichotomy. Finally, in the Conclusion, I reiterate the non-identical and non-sovereign concept of God which emerges from these texts, and stress its significance for any assessment of the ethics and politics of deconstruction.

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# Introduction

## 1. After the ‘Theological Turn’?

Although contentious, Slavoj Žižek’s 2006 proclamation that “the Derridean fashion is fading away”<sup>1</sup> recognised continental philosophy’s increasing divergence from Derrida’s work. Such a move may be understood both as part of a broader rejection of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ and as the search for a more overtly political philosophy. Here Derrida’s critics, who tend to focus on his later work, include Žižek himself and Alain Badiou, some of whose criticisms of contemporary philosophy in ‘The (Re)turn of Philosophy Itself’ are directly aimed at Derrida. In an indictment of the paralysis of philosophy, Badiou asserts his intention “to tear philosophy away from this genealogical imperative”,<sup>2</sup> critiquing what he perceives as the political passivity of philosophy and “those who intend to fill the gap with meager reflections on ethics”.<sup>3</sup> This urgent desire for a new, more prescriptive politics fuels Badiou’s frustration with deconstruction, and provides one of the triggers for what John Mullarkey terms ‘post-continental philosophy’. Mullarkey asserts that “the interest in Deleuze and growing interest in Badiou, for instance, is partly related to their positive engagement with both the sciences and radical politics”,<sup>4</sup> and his study draws out the tensions between immanence and transcendence, and realism and anti-realism, which emerge in the encounters between continental and post-continental philosophy.

One expression of the tension between realism and anti-realism emerges under the aegis of ‘speculative realism’, a growing movement which connects the work of Žižek, Badiou and Deleuze to that of rising figures such as François Laruelle, Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier, thinkers united by a certain rejection of “the traditional focus on textual critique”<sup>5</sup> often associated with Derrida, and by a subsequent “turn toward reality itself”.<sup>6</sup> Introducing these thinkers in a recent collection, the editors disavow any debt to deconstruction, clearly setting this new species of thought in contra-distinction to post-

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘The (Re)turn of Philosophy Itself’, in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 113-138 (p. 115).

<sup>3</sup> Badiou, pp. 113-138 (p. 114).

<sup>4</sup> John Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, ‘Towards a Speculative Philosophy’, in *The Speculative Turn*, ed. by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

<sup>6</sup> Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

structuralism, deconstruction, and to the 'linguistic turn'. Although 'speculative realism' describes variant texts and ideas, certain key themes emerge. Such thinkers emphasise the autonomy of philosophy and the need for an ambitious new philosophy which is not dependent on other disciplines and which rejects the genealogical mode often associated with Derrida.<sup>7</sup> Further, these thinkers argue that the "critical and linguistic turns"<sup>8</sup> of the twentieth century are both politically insufficient and incapable of answering the questions raised by current sciences, technologies and environmental problems. Developing this claim, the editors of *The Speculative Turn* observe:

This general anti-realist trend has manifested itself in continental philosophy in a number of ways, but especially through preoccupation with such issues as death and finitude, an aversion to science, a focus on language, culture and subjectivity to the detriment of material factors, an anthropocentric stance towards nature, a relinquishing of the search for absolutes, and an acquiescence to the specific conditions of our historical thrownness. We might also point to the lack of genuine and effective political action in continental philosophy- arguably a result of the 'cultural' turn taken by Marxism, and the increased focus on textual and ideological critique at the expense of the economic realm.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux critiques the so-called 'theological turn'.<sup>10</sup> Attributing the perceived inadequacy of current philosophy to 'correlationism', or "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other",<sup>11</sup> Meillassoux looks to account for this religious or theological 'turn' in continental philosophy. Here he claims that "thought, under the pressure of correlationism, has relinquished its right to criticize the irrational when the latter lays claim to the absolute".<sup>12</sup> He continues:

Once the absolute has become unthinkable, even atheism, which also targets God's inexistence in the manner of an absolute, is reduced to a mere belief, and hence to a religion, albeit of the nihilist kind. Faith is pitched against faith, since what determines our fundamental choices cannot be rationally proved. In other words,

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Bryant, Srnicek and Harman's claim that "the phase of subservient commentary on the history of philosophy seems to have ended", Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, pp. 1-18 (p. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

<sup>9</sup> Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, pp. 1-18 (p. 4).

<sup>10</sup> For an account of Meillassoux's relationship with this 'turn', including some attempt to locate Derrida's own work, see Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Meillassoux, p. 45.



the de-absolutization of thought boils down to the mobilization of a *fideist* argument; but a fideism that is 'fundamental' rather than merely 'historical' in nature... Scepticism with regard to the metaphysical absolute thereby legitimates *de jure* every variety whatsoever of belief in an absolute, the best as well as the worst. The destruction of the metaphysical rationalization of Christian theology has resulted in a generalized becoming-religious of thought, viz., in a *fideism of any belief whatsoever*.<sup>13</sup>

Meillassoux criticises the effects of this generalized fideism, arguing that philosophy has conceded too much ground and must turn to address "properly ontological questions".<sup>14</sup> It is in this philosophical context, alongside a continuing attempt to understand Derrida's inheritance, given his own problematization of that concept, that the current questions and preoccupations surrounding Derrida's work, emerge.

Since Derrida's increasingly explicit engagement with ethical and religious issues in the 1980s, ethical and religious readings have been prevalent and persistent in Derrida studies, with Derrida's work often viewed in light of a religious or theological 'turn'.<sup>15</sup> Such a 'turn' is widely regarded as part of the broader "return of the religious" in continental philosophy

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<sup>13</sup> Meillassoux, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, pp. 1-18 (p. 4). On this, John Mullarkey highlights some of the problems that speculative realism or post-continental philosophy might face. He describes: "In the end, Post-Continental philosophy gives rise to a problem of discourse, of the possibility of epistemic norms and even political values within a naturalistic thinking that must be travailed if we are not to repeat the same philosophemes that Derrida's work highlighted so well. How can a philosophy of immanence critique its outside?" Mullarkey, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> The groundbreaking ethical reading of Derrida's work is Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Critiques of Critchley's position can be found in Marko Zlomislic, *Jacques Derrida's Aporetic Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007) and Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

and beyond, to which Meillassoux refers.<sup>16</sup> As Frederic Jameson explains, “religion is once again very much on the agenda of any serious attempt to come to terms with the specificity of our own time”.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, for Arthur Bradley in his comprehensive ‘Genealogy of the Theological Turn’, “Derrida’s work has arguably been *the* defining site where theological debates within continental philosophy are played out”.<sup>18</sup> However, both the existence of such a ‘turn’ in Derrida’s work, its nature, and its consequences, are contested.<sup>19</sup> Referring to his own work, Derrida observes a change “in the strategy of the text”<sup>20</sup> which might usefully be described in James K. A. Smith’s terms, as a shift “from the theoretical frameworks that shape our given institutions to [a] consider[ation] (and disturb[ance]) [of] the institutions themselves”,<sup>21</sup> or, in the words of Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, to

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’, trans. by Samuel Weber in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Andijar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 42-101 (p. 78). An early, influential analysis of this ‘turn’ can be found in Dominique Janicaud’s *Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Paris: L’Éclat, 1991). Since then, and aside from works focusing on Derrida, further examples and examinations of this philosophical phenomenon are disparate and include: Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Pat Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Mary Bryden, *Deleuze and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2000); Kevin Hart, *Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); Michel Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press 2008); Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 2003). Interpretations of this trend are offered by Philippa Berry who attributes it to a reassessment of Heidegger, and Gianni Vattimo, who links it to a postmodern dissolution of meta-narratives and looks to the possibility of approaching “the religious need of common consciousness independently of the framework of Enlightenment critique.” See Philippa Berry, ‘Introduction’, in *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, ed. by Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-8 (p. 6), and Gianni Vattimo, ‘The Trace of the Trace’, in *Religion*, ed. by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 79-94 (p. 84).

<sup>17</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn’, *Paragraph*, 29 (2006), 21-42 (p. 22).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Kuisma Korhonen, *Textual Friendship: The Essay as Impossible Encounter from Plato and Montaigne to Levinas and Derrida* (New York: Humanity Books, 2006). Korhonen insists that “The term ‘ethical turn’ is, however, misleading, because there is not any radical reorientation or rupture in Derrida’s work”, p. 363. Other critical issues raised by the ‘turn’ include its implications for secularity; on this, see Mark Cauchi, ‘The Secular to Come: Interrogating the Derridean “Secular”’, *JCRT*, 10.1 (Winter 2009), 1-25; and Derrida’s own challenge to the meaning of the term ‘religion’. This is illustrated by David Wood’s comment: “For it is all very well to call Derrida a ‘religious thinker’, but, after Derrida, the meaning of ‘religious’ has arguably changed”, David Wood, ‘God: Poison or Cure? A Reply to John D. Caputo’, in *Styles of Piety: Practicing Philosophy after the Death of God*, ed. by S. Clark Buckner and Matthew Statler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 205-211 (p. 206).

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Epoché and Faith: An interview with Jacques Derrida’, in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. by Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 27-50 (p. 37). Derrida is here referring specifically to his approach to the name of God.

<sup>21</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005). p. 65.

“the phase of affirmative deconstruction”.<sup>22</sup> Of those who accept some notion of a shift or ‘turn’, critics are broadly divided between those such as John D. Caputo, for whom the ‘turn’ is a fulfilment of deconstructive thought, and those such as Arthur Bradley, Martin Hägglund and Slavoj Žižek, who reject the religious elements or implications of Derrida’s thought, with Žižek dismissing it as part of a “massive onslaught of obscurantism”.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the dominance of religious and ethical readings of Derrida’s work in recent years, latterly, the non-ethical and non-religious – and often more explicitly political – approach, is gaining popularity. This is no doubt related to the larger philosophical context which I have discussed, in particular the increasing scepticism towards Derrida, and the appeal for a more political philosophy.

As early as 1996, Richard Beardsworth’s monograph *Derrida and the Political* delineated two possible futures for Derrida’s thought: one left-wing, and more explicitly politically focused, which returns to the earlier texts in order to re-think the relation between the human and the technical; and the other, right-wing, focusing on the aporia as such, particularly through the religious imagery of later Derrida.<sup>24</sup> In light of more recent developments, Arthur Bradley has declared Beardsworth’s prediction “uncannily prophetic”, siding with the technical over the religious, and insisting that “the theological turn must be consigned to deconstruction’s past if the historical present it describes is to gain inventive or transformative power and the radical future it affirms is to open.”<sup>25</sup> Bradley’s uncompromising stance comprises a theoretical objection, derived from Bernard Stiegler, that the later work is guilty of a “*transcendentalization* of the aporia of origin”,<sup>26</sup> alongside a rejection of critical material which manipulates deconstruction in service of religious ends.

Underlying Beardsworth’s position is the belief that religious and progressively political readings of Derrida are incompatible, and that, as Bradley insists, we must reject the former in order to safeguard the latter. Although such a firm division between religion and politics seems undeconstructive, the rejection of, and hostility towards, religious readings of Derrida, often in the name of a more overtly political deconstruction, is fast becoming the new orthodoxy amongst Derrida’s commentators. Significant figures here

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<sup>22</sup> Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, ‘Introduction’, in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. by Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 1-37.

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 156-7.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 38).

<sup>26</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 26).

include Martin Hägglund, to whom I shall return in Chapter One, and Patrick O'Connor, who locates himself within the dichotomy which Beardsworth sets out between left- and right-wing, or politics and religion. O'Connor asserts:

The insights of Gasché, Lawlor and Hägglund allow an atheistic and profane reading of Derrida. Consolidating this orientation, I affirm herein a strictly 'left-Derridean' re-appraisal of Derrida's work. In analogy with the way the Young Hegelians contested 'conservative' appropriations of Hegel, this work endeavours to present an orientation of Derrida's work which deviates from interpretations of Derrida which cast him as primarily an ethical and religious philosopher (including among others Caputo, Simon Critchley, Hent de Vries, Richard Kearney, Mark Dooley and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>27</sup>

Keen to assert the "radical egalitarian impetus"<sup>28</sup> of deconstruction against ethical and religious readings, O'Connor stresses Derrida's status as a philosopher and political thinker, and terms "commendable" Bradley's "desire for a materialist turn in deconstruction".<sup>29</sup> Implicit in O'Connor's position is the conflation of ethical and religious readings and the assumption that the ethical and political elements of Derrida's writing are easily separable. A similar separation between ethics and politics can be detected in the work of Alex Thomson<sup>30</sup> and it is becoming acceptable to conflate and cursorily dismiss highly disparate religious and ethical readings, even under the guise that one is returning to a more 'authentic' Derrida. Examples of this include Jones Irwin, who argues that *On Touching* "reminds one of the explosive and recalcitrant dimension of deconstruction which is too often lost in attempts to subsume Derrida's thought under, for example, attempts to 'return' to more or less orthodox versions of ethics or religion".<sup>31</sup> Equally, in a controversial article which stresses the "neurally political"<sup>32</sup> nature of *On Touching*, Tom Cohen "attempts to lean against the suffocating trend towards mourning, theological exegesis and close-circuit canonisation that has characterised Derrida studies in the wake of his death",<sup>33</sup> and indicts the "reading of proximity, or a domestication dovetailing with a certain misappropriation, more or less welcomed, of the turn toward ethics."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Patrick O'Connor, *Derrida: Profanations* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> O'Connor, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> O'Connor, p. 3

<sup>30</sup> Alex Thomson, *Deconstruction and Democracy* (London: Continuum, 2005). I shall return to this in the Conclusion.

<sup>31</sup> Jones Irwin, *Derrida and the Writing of the Body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Tom Cohen, "Tactless- the Severed Hand of J.D.", in *Derrida Today* 2.1 (2009), 1-22 (p. 4).

<sup>33</sup> Cohen, 1-22 (p. 1).

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, 1-22 (p. 20).

Such dismissive responses to ethical and religious analyses of Derrida's work are frequently motivated by the valuable intention to recuperate Derrida for a new generation, and particularly to demonstrate his contribution to philosophical and political thought in a climate which is increasingly uninterested in, or even hostile to, his work. However, without any interaction with ethics or religion, this political power, and particularly Derrida's notion of responsibility, feels undertheorised, even meaningless. Such critics are also at risk of fetishizing the political, of setting it apart from deconstructive critique. On this danger, Geoff Bennington warns: "'politics', so often invoked as though it were *eo ipso* something 'radical', remains in just the same position of passive inheritance until its metaphysical genealogy is interrogated, and it is to that extent no more promising a candidate for 'radicality' than anything else".<sup>35</sup>

In response to such 'political' readings, I reject the premise that all ethical and religious exegesis is outdated, erroneous or depoliticising and argue that an oversimplistic denunciation is as reductive as some of the religious readings which these critics look to counter. In contrast, this thesis will return to the question of a religious 'turn' in Derrida's work, analysing Derrida's engagement with questions of religion and God, and assessing the relationship between the religious and the political as it emerges or is undermined. Focusing primarily on Derrida's 'atheistic' rethinking of God, I will consider what Hent de Vries terms Derrida's "search and desire for the appropriate speech with respect to God",<sup>36</sup> and investigate the ways in which Derrida's adoption of different textual modes influences the development of the figure of God and reveals a significant relationship between God and the process of writing. Turning first to current religious readings of Derrida's work, I shall assess their insights and limitations before outlining an alternative reading, which both responds to the religious elements and to the importance of mode in Derrida's writing.

## 2. Assessing the Religious Readings

One of the earliest and most enduring interests in Derrida's significance for religious thought comes from Biblical Studies, which has been influenced by Derrida since the early

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<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), p. 312.

1980s.<sup>37</sup> Often inspired by what Yvonne Sherwood calls Derrida's own "penchant for very careful, very risky Bible study",<sup>38</sup> writing in this field tends to use deconstruction, often Derrida's earlier work, to suggest alternative perspectives towards biblical texts. Historically, Sherwood observes, this methodology resulted in "certain institutionalised misreadings of vintage Derrida",<sup>39</sup> a trend which she aims to change. Despite this endeavour, it seems that recent texts in the field still offer rather predictable applications of deconstruction, or fail to explore the nuances of Derrida's position.<sup>40</sup> Although Derrida's work may be useful for Biblical Studies, it seems unlikely that Biblical Studies will illuminate Derrida's work- particularly its relationship with religion- on its own terms.

A similar problem is evident in specifically Jewish analyses of Derrida's work. Although early scholarship on Derrida's interest in religion was almost exclusively Christian,<sup>41</sup> critical work has since diversified, incorporating responses from other religious traditions.<sup>42</sup> In reaction both to Jürgen Habermas's controversial claim that "Derrida, all denials notwithstanding, remains close to Jewish mysticism"<sup>43</sup> and to Derrida's own

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<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the earliest example of this is 'Derrida and Biblical Studies', *Semeia*, 23 (1982). More recent examples include: *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Patrick J. E. Chatelion Counet, *John, a Postmodern Gospel: Introduction to Deconstructive Exegesis Applied to the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Brian D. Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Theodore W. Jennings, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: On Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, ed. by David Jobling, Tina Pippin and Ronald Schleifer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 1994); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and David Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Yvonne Sherwood, 'Introduction: Derrida's Bible', in *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida*, ed. by Yvonne Sherwood (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1-20 (p. 1).

<sup>39</sup> Sherwood, pp. 1-20 (p. 7).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Andrew P. Wilson's largely unsupported and rather controversial claims that there is a schism "between the deconstructivist movement and Derridean theory" (p. 20), and that Derrida is "reasonably disinterested in the political applications of his own work" (p. 39). Andrew P. Wilson, *Transfigured: A Derridean Rereading of the Markan Transfiguration* (London: T & T Clark, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> It is possible to argue that Christianity has a privileged relationship to deconstruction. See Derrida's description of the Christian origins of the term 'deconstruction' in Derrida, 'Époché and Faith', pp. 27-50 (p. 33). See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York, Fordham University Press, 2008) and Leonard Lawlor's claim that Derrida's text *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* "opens a larger, more ambitious project that we can call 'the deconstruction of Christianity'". Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Other examples include Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: a comparative study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004); Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Mustapha Chérif, *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1984); Youxuan Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics* (London: Routledge 2001), and *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, ed. by Jin Y. Park (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve lectures*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 182.

engagement with his Jewish roots, many of these responses come from Jewish perspectives. However, in focusing on what Derrida's work may offer for Judaism, or suggesting that Judaism may provide the authoritative way of reading Derrida, these works are often limited in their exegesis. One example of this is Gideon Ofrat's *The Jewish Derrida*, a thorough and systematic assessment of Derrida's relationship with Judaism whose claim that the figure of the Jew provides the definitive approach to Derrida is nonetheless reductive.<sup>44</sup> Another interesting and useful study is that of Susan Handelman, who views Derrida's [early] work as "the latest in the line of Jewish heretic hermeneutics"<sup>45</sup>, emphasising the importance of writing in Rabbinic thought and its independence from an ontotheological phonocentrism.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, other attempts to 'claim' Derrida for Judaism, such as that by Jonathan Boyarin who asserts that Derrida is one of the "three great Jewish thinkers of our century much of whose work can be seen as signposts leading toward a postmodern Jewish science",<sup>47</sup> or Walter Brueggemann, who insists that "Derrida's deconstruction is indeed a form of Jewish iconoclasm",<sup>48</sup> are interesting and insightful yet lack sufficient focus on deconstruction to radically change our perception of Derrida's work.

A rather more thorough approach to Derrida's relationship with questions of 'God' and religion is provided by John D. Caputo, although, as I shall show, his account is not without limitations. Now regarded as "the classic treatment of Derrida and religion",<sup>49</sup> Caputo holds that "*deconstruction itself is structured like a religion* – it lives and breathes a religious and messianic air; like religion it turns on a faith, a hope, even a prayer for the possibility of the impossible".<sup>50</sup> Caputo characterises a yearning for the impossible and an infinite openness to heterogeneity as religious features of deconstruction. Crucially, however, this "religiousness" is indeterminate and detached from religious institutions and their violent

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<sup>44</sup> See for example, Gideon Ofrat's claim that "circumcision is Jacques Derrida's most basic philosophical experience", Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. by Peretz Kidron (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1982), p. 163.

<sup>46</sup> One limitation shared by both Ofrat and Handelman's texts is an overstatement of the significance of the absent father in Derrida's work.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 195.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 740.

<sup>49</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 142. Smith is referring to Caputo's monograph *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*.

<sup>50</sup> John D. Caputo in John D. Caputo and Carl Raschke, 'Loosening Philosophy's Tongue: A Conversation with Jack Caputo', *JCRT*, 3.2 (Spring 2002) <[http://www.jcrt.org/archives/03.2/caputo\\_raschke.shtml](http://www.jcrt.org/archives/03.2/caputo_raschke.shtml)> [accessed 25 May 2010] (para. 5 of 47).

heritages, “it repeats nondogmatically the religious structure of experience, the category of the religious”.<sup>51</sup> In this way, it also resembles the messianic structure without being bound to any determinate messianism; it is, as Derrida describes in *Specters of Marx*, “a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianism without messianism”.<sup>52</sup> Yet, as James K. A. Smith acknowledges, this ‘structural messianism’ is problematic:

If, in order to avoid any implication of the messianic in the wars of the determinate messianisms, we evacuate the messianic structure of any content, then we must conclude, as Caputo rightly observed, that the messianic is not a quasi transcendental but a pure transcendental *stricto sensu*—a pure, Greco-modern universal of the most classical species that remains immune to history and space. And that, as far as deconstruction is concerned, is heresy, along with being a little *incroyable*<sup>53</sup>

Caputo concedes that deconstruction must therefore be “*one more* messianism”.<sup>54</sup> Smith concurs, and reveals his own Christian position, arguing that Derrida should rethink religion as pharmacological and acknowledge that determinate messianisms “are not necessarily violent”.<sup>55</sup> The assumed dichotomy between the structural messianic and determinate messianisms reinforces both the distinction between form and content which deconstruction so rigorously questions, as well as the empirico-transcendental distinction. Such tensions in Derrida’s work are crucial and demand a careful articulation of Derrida’s quasi-transcendental position if Derrida is to escape Arthur Bradley’s charge that he transcendentalizes the aporia.<sup>56</sup> However, Caputo retreats from these and other tensions

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<sup>51</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. xxi.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 59. Frederic Jameson offers an interesting reading of the inherently Judaic nature of Derrida’s understanding of the messianic, asserting that “...the messianic does not mean immediate hope in that sense, perhaps not even hope against hope; it is a unique variety of the species hope that scarcely bears any of the latter’s normal characteristics, and that flourishes only in a time of absolute hopelessness”, Jameson, p. 177.

<sup>53</sup> James K. A. Smith, ‘Determined Violence: Derrida’s Structural Religion’, *The Journal of Religion*, 78.2 (April 1998), 197-212 (p. 210).

<sup>54</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 142.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, ‘Determined Violence’, 197-212 (p. 211).

<sup>56</sup> It is Bradley himself who resolves this apparent tension between the structural messianic and individual messianisms most convincingly. He asserts: “The logic of deconstruction would insist that there are no absolutely determined messianisms because every religion of the book needs to open itself to the possibility of repetition in contexts outside its own choosing in order to be itself in the first place and –by the same token– there can be no completely general messianism either because every messianism still contains the traces of its historical context and there is no possibility of escaping context and historical contingency *per se*”, Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 40. For discussions of the meaning and significance of the ‘quasi-transcendental’ for Derrida, see Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 267-284, Richard Rorty, ‘Is Derrida a “Quasi”-Transcendental Philosopher?’, *Contemporary Literature*, 36.1 (Spring 1995), 173-200, and John Protevi’s *Political Physics*. Protevi refers to “the peculiar ascent/fall movement of quasi-



and does little to elucidate either the complex relationship between religion, ethics, and politics at the interface of the messianic, or the connection between the 'structural religion' and the religious implications of the structure of subjectivity.

A similar claim about deconstruction's affinity with religion is made by Henry Sussman, who maintains that Derrida's "rapprochement"<sup>57</sup> with religion is part of his "theological project"<sup>58</sup> and, moreover, that deconstruction is "the fourth possible Abrahamic religion".<sup>59</sup> The nature of this claim remains uncertain, with Sussman at times labelling deconstruction both as an independent religion and as a structure or process which is parasitic on the Abrahamic religions, operating within their self critical spaces and providing them with redemptive possibilities.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Sussman undermines his original boldness by asserting that "Deconstruction is too polymorphous in its approaches to constitute a sustained position";<sup>61</sup> rather, it is more "a bearing" towards life than a set of dogmas, and such a 'bearing' "has never sufficed as the sufficient condition for a religious community in the past".<sup>62</sup>

One key feature of Caputo's reading is his attention to the increasing influence of Levinas and Kierkegaard on Derrida's work. Caputo distinguishes his own position from that of Mark C. Taylor, who proceeds from "a more Nietzschean conception of deconstruction".<sup>63</sup> Taylor, along with Carl A. Raschke and others is strongly influenced by the 'Death of God' theology proposed by Thomas J. J. Altizer,<sup>64</sup> and allies it closely with deconstruction. Taylor identifies deconstruction as "*the 'hermeneutic' of the death of God*" and thus the starting point for his "postmodern a/theology"<sup>65</sup>; Raschke similarly claims that "deconstruction is the death of God put into writing".<sup>66</sup> Although these thinkers foreground the crucial yet underexplored relationship between God and writing in Derrida, however

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transcendentality", John Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida and the body politic* (London: Athlone Press, 2001), p. 85.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Sussman, *The Task of the Critics: Poetics, Philosophy and Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 207.

<sup>58</sup> Sussman, p. 185.

<sup>59</sup> Sussman, p. 240.

<sup>60</sup> Sussman, p. 180.

<sup>61</sup> Sussman, p. 224.

<sup>62</sup> Sussman, p. 225.

<sup>63</sup> John D. Caputo, 'Loosening Philosophy's Tongue' (para. 12 of 47).

<sup>64</sup> For connections between 'Death of God' theology and deconstruction see Thomas J. J. Altizer, Max A. Myers, Carl A. Raschke, Robert P. Scharlemann, Mark C. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

<sup>65</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984), p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Carl A. Raschke, 'The Deconstruction of God', in *Deconstruction and Theology*, as before, pp. 1-33 (p. 27).

this schema is also a rather reductive interpretation of the multi-faceted God which appears in Derrida's work. Steven Shakespeare observes:

Their use of the trope of incarnation (especially when allied to Altizer's notion of total presence) suggests a total emptying out of God into writing, God embodied as the trace. This risks losing sight of ways in which God names a future and an otherness that resist embodied immediacy. The undecidability in Derrida's thinking, which still maintains contact with reference and the singular otherness named by God, here becomes 'decided', a sacralization of purely immanent flows.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, Hugh Rayment-Pickard notes Derrida's own rejection of the reductive 'Death of God' position: "I do not believe in what is so easily called the death of philosophy (nor, moreover, in the simple death of whatever –the book, man, god, especially since, as we all know, what is dead wields a very specific power".<sup>68</sup> Despite their likenesses, Caputo stresses the dissimilarity between himself and the 'Death of God' thinkers, particularly Taylor, a difference characterised as that "between immanence and the wholly other".<sup>69</sup> Caputo contends that deconstruction is religious in a more 'traditional' way than the 'Death of God' thinkers admit. However, his own understanding of deconstruction as "a style of thinking" rather than "a set of theories" can lead to imprecision, and, as Shakespeare remarks, is "ontologically thin".<sup>70</sup>

A thinker who may resolve some of the problems with Caputo's account, and a key interlocutor of both Caputo and Derrida, is Richard Kearney. Kearney situates his work within the 'return of the religious', using Derrida and deconstruction to rethink God outside of ontotheology, institution and dogma in order to formulate "a form of post-theism that allows us to revisit the sacred in the midst of the secular".<sup>71</sup> Although his goal, to resuscitate a "vigorously ecumenical"<sup>72</sup> theism for the twenty first century, clearly delineates his project from that of Derrida, all three thinkers are united by their interest in what Kearney refers to

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<sup>67</sup> Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Derrida, quoted in Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 134.

<sup>69</sup> John D. Caputo, 'Loosening Philosophy's Tongue' (para. 11 of 47). This characterisation of the difference between the two thinkers seems to overlook the deconstructive emphasis on the inevitability of contamination.

<sup>70</sup> Shakespeare, *Derrida*, p. 200.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 57.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 6.

as a “God- or post God- of radical powerlessness”.<sup>73</sup> Of Derrida’s famously declared atheism, he asserts:

Atheism, then, is less a refusal of God as such, for Derrida, than a renunciation of a specific God (or Gods) – a renunciation which could almost be said to serve as a condition of possibility of a God still to come, still to be named.<sup>74</sup>

This observation is considerably more nuanced than the claim that Derrida’s atheism renders him uninterested in or hostile towards questions of religion and ‘God’. However, whereas deconstruction denies faith a predetermined focus, Kearney looks to affirm a scriptural God, and to pursue the impact of Derrida’s observations about faith, God and eschatology on Christianity. He argues that the indeterminate faith of deconstruction risks “becoming so empty that it loses faith in the here and now altogether”,<sup>75</sup> and perceives “a radical absence of any historical instantiation of the divine”.<sup>76</sup> Derrida himself expands on this point, asserting:

I would share your hope for resurrection, reconciliation, and redemption. But I think I have a responsibility as someone who thinks deconstructively. Even if I dream of redemption, I have the responsibility to acknowledge, to obey the necessity of the possibility that there is *khōra* rather than a relationship with the anthropo-theologic God of Revelation. At some point, you, Richard, translate your faith into something determinable and then you have to keep the ‘name’ of resurrection. My own understanding of faith is that there is faith whenever one gives up not only any certainty but also any determined hope. If one says that resurrection is the horizon of one’s hope then one knows what one names when one says ‘resurrection’ – faith is not pure faith. It is already knowledge, that’s why, sometimes, you call me an atheist.<sup>77</sup>

The choice which Derrida presents here is between a certain unframed or unlimited hope or faith (*khōra*) and faith in a predefined God. Kearney represents this choice simply as that between atheism and theism,<sup>78</sup> although Caputo has argued that Derrida’s work itself

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<sup>73</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 58.

<sup>74</sup> Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, p. 71.

<sup>75</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 65.

<sup>76</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 64. Kearney here overlooks Derrida’s presentation of the problematic relationship between singular, ahistorical incidences of faith and the historicity of religious institutions. See, for example: Jacques Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’, trans. by John P. Leavey Jr. in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 35-85.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Terror and Religion (Jacques Derrida in conversation with Richard Kearney)’, in *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, ed. by Peter Gratton and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 18-28 (p. 26).

<sup>78</sup> By time of the publication of *Anatheism* in 2010, Kearney’s position has shifted. ‘Anatheism’ refers to nondogmatic versions of both theism and atheism, and so the choice between the two is no longer central to Kearney’s argument.

challenges this opposition. The approaches of Derrida and his critics to this problematic are significant, and thus it is unsurprising, despite Derrida's apparent clarity here, that some confusion surrounds them. Kearney, for example, identifies inconsistency in Caputo's response. At times, Kearney observes, Caputo privileges khōra, and at others, he insists that "the issue remains radically undecidable".<sup>79</sup> Kearney regards Caputo's unwillingness to clarify his position as disingenuous; it is "as though Caputo, a crypto-theist, is desperately trying *not* to evangelize deconstruction by turning it into a crypto-theology".<sup>80</sup> Kearney's criticism is apt as, despite Caputo's evangelism, he is often reluctant to elucidate his position towards traditional theism. Following Derrida's clarification of his own position, Kearney suggests that both Caputo and, at times, Derrida "set up a somewhat precipitous gulf" between "divinity" and "its deconstructive other".<sup>81</sup>

Caputo's work on Derrida, particularly his focus on the importance of Levinas and Kierkegaard for Derrida, has proved influential for other commentators. Modifying Caputo's sympathetic position,<sup>82</sup> James K. A. Smith reads Derrida through the latter's engagement with Levinas, insisting that "deconstruction is an affirmative response to the call of the other",<sup>83</sup> which has always been both political<sup>84</sup> and Levinasian.<sup>85</sup> For Smith, any 'turn' is better understood as "an intensification of its [deconstruction's] original vocation"<sup>86</sup> rather than an incursion of anything new. He maintains that Levinas's influence is always "filtered through Kierkegaard",<sup>87</sup> however, he conflates Levinas and Derrida and lacks a nuanced account of the relationship between ethics and religion in Derrida, following Levinas's belief that "the ethical relation to the other *is* religion".<sup>88</sup> This overlooks the tensions between religion, faith and ethics which exemplify Derrida's engagement with the religious. Elsewhere, Smith is ambivalent towards Derrida. Envisaging future possibilities for Christianity, including that of a "deconstructive church",<sup>89</sup> he aligns himself with

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<sup>79</sup> Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 201.

<sup>80</sup> Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 209.

<sup>81</sup> Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 208.

<sup>82</sup> For another account of Derrida largely following Caputo see Dawne McCance, *Derrida on Religion: Thinker of Differance* (London: Equinox, 2009).

<sup>83</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 65.

<sup>85</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 14.

<sup>86</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 80.

<sup>88</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 78.

<sup>89</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 57.

Radical Orthodoxy, which he perceives as “more properly postmodern than Derridean religious scepticism”<sup>90</sup> due to its rejection of the Cartesian model of knowledge.

Perhaps one of the most significant religious responses to deconstruction, Radical Orthodoxy, “a sensibility”<sup>91</sup> rather than a movement, rejects the Cartesian paradigm and theological concessions to modernity in favour of an autonomous, unapologetic, and ecumenical postmodern theology which begins with revelation and incarnation and returns to “the deep theological resources of the Christian tradition”,<sup>92</sup> notably Augustine and Aquinas, as well as to a rethinking of Platonism.<sup>93</sup> Led by John Milbank, Radical Orthodoxy critiques Derrida as a Nietzschean, dismissing his thought and that of other thinkers as “elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy”. Such a philosophy, Milbank claims, is allied with “postmodernism” and “articulates itself as, first, an absolute historicism, second as an ontology of difference, and third as an ethical nihilism”.<sup>94</sup> In a rather shallow reading of Derrida, Milbank claims that deconstruction’s anti-foundationalism “implies a tiresome, red-guard politics of ceaseless negativity”.<sup>95</sup> In a more extensive consideration of Derrida elsewhere, he rejects the “gesture of martyrdom”<sup>96</sup> which he perceives as constituting both Derrida’s ethics and a certain post-Kantian tradition, favouring instead “a mutual and unending gift-exchange”<sup>97</sup> as the basis of ethics. Milbank repudiates not only the lack of mutuality he perceives in Derrida’s ethics but also the assumption that death can provide any grounds for ethics (he insists rather that it is “complicit with evil”<sup>98</sup>), the insistence on a non-interventionist God if any, and the supposition that “religious self-sacrifice is only

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, p. 126.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, p. 117.

<sup>92</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic and Bletchley: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 68.

<sup>93</sup> Douglas Hedley and Wayne J. Hankey argue that “the theology of Radical Orthodoxy remains deeply and self-consciously enigmatic. The style is oracular and opaque, its rhetoric combative; it refuses dialogue”, Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, ‘Introduction’, in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), pp. xiii-xviii (p. xiv). A variety of other critical positions can be found in the same volume.

<sup>94</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell 1990), p. 278. Assertions of Derrida’s nihilism are not unique to Radical Orthodoxy. See also, for example, Julian Young’s dismissal of Derrida’s work as a manifestation of “the nihilism of postmodernity” in Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 196. For a convincing rebuttal of the nihilist charge see Hugh Rayment-Pickard, ‘Derrida and Nihilism’, in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, as before, pp. 161-175.

<sup>95</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 315.

<sup>96</sup> John Milbank, ‘The Midwinter Sacrifice’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. by Graham Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2001), pp. 107-130 (p. 113).

<sup>97</sup> Milbank, ‘The Midwinter Sacrifice’, pp. 107-130 (p. 121).

<sup>98</sup> Milbank, ‘The Midwinter Sacrifice’, pp. 107-130 (p. 122).

realized in a *secular* sphere”.<sup>99</sup> Rejecting all non-theological interpretations of ontology and phenomenology as incomplete, other Radical Orthodoxy thinkers follow Milbank’s critique of Derrida. Catherine Pickstock repudiates Derrida as a nihilist, complicit in the necrophiliac tendencies of postmodernity, and argues that “Derrida’s emphasis on writing is a denial of the living and dying physical *body*”.<sup>100</sup> Clearly driven by a strong alternative agenda, Radical Orthodoxy offers a limited, even faulty, account of Derrida’s relationship with the religious.

Rather more generous and exploratory accounts of Derrida and religion can be found in the writing of thinkers such as Graham Ward, Kevin Hart and Hugh Rayment-Pickard who focus on Derrida’s relationship with language. Ward argues that “*Différance* calls the theological into play”<sup>101</sup> and links Derrida to the theologian Karl Barth with the claim that Barth provides a theological reading of the “law of textuality”<sup>102</sup> that is *différance* (and that “language is always and ineradicably theological”<sup>103</sup>). Ward regards Derrida’s ‘turn’ as a “‘spiritualizing’” of “the economy of representation”<sup>104</sup> and Derrida’s work as a “supplement to Levinas’s”.<sup>105</sup> Crucially, he perceives the importance of textuality for Derrida’s analysis of humanity, divinity and their interaction. However, by restricting Derrida’s thought to Barth’s Christianity he short-circuits possible non-Christian responses as, “Put briefly, the incarnation is the meaning of and the hermeneutic for understanding all language”.<sup>106</sup>

Kevin Hart uses deconstruction, and draws attention to the deconstructive elements of scripture and theology, in order to conceive of “a ‘non-metaphysical theology’”.<sup>107</sup> His

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<sup>99</sup> Milbank, ‘The Midwinter Sacrifice’, pp. 107-130 (p. 122). For a generally convincing critique of Milbank’s position, see Tyler Roberts, ‘Sacrifice and Secularization: Derrida, de Vries and the Future of Mourning’, in *Derrida and Religion*, as before, pp. 263-282.

<sup>100</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 19. Pickstock’s claim overlooks texts such as ‘Circumfession’, which focuses on ‘the living and dying physical body’. Jacques Derrida, ‘Circumfession’, in *Jacques Derrida*, ed. and trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999). See also John Caputo’s claim that “Flesh is the locus of obligation” in John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 173.

<sup>101</sup> Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 232.

<sup>102</sup> Ward, p. 9.

<sup>103</sup> Ward, p. 9.

<sup>104</sup> Ward, p. 229.

<sup>105</sup> Ward, p. 175.

<sup>106</sup> Ward, p. 31.

<sup>107</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xi. A similar position is found in Don Cupitt’s work. Cupitt aims to “get religious belief (and myself, and you) into this new completely post-metaphysical world without subverting myself.” Don Cupitt, *Only Human* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. xi. For a critical perspective on this “sharpening of the anti-

particular interest is in the connections between mysticism, negative theology and deconstruction, and he writes with a focus on Derrida's earlier texts. He argues that Derrida overlooks the "deconstructive power" of negative theology,<sup>108</sup> a claim which is disproved by later texts such as 'Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)', unpublished at the time of Hart's writing. Other assertions which are questioned by later publications include the statement that "deconstruction poses no assertive power"<sup>109</sup> and that "Derrida is more concerned" with "the God of the philosophers" rather than "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob".<sup>110</sup>

Engaging with Derrida's later work, Hugh Rayment-Pickard argues that Derrida "implicitly recommends the idea of the impossibility of God as an alternative theology".<sup>111</sup> He tracks Derrida's analyses of Husserl and Heidegger, particularly through the concept of death, in order to investigate Derrida's 'impossible God'. Rayment-Pickard asserts the primacy of theological claims<sup>112</sup> and argues that 'general theology' is "*the* core topic and organizing theme behind Derrida's entire project".<sup>113</sup> Yet, having foregrounded 'general theology' and its focus on "the conditions of possibility of 'all the metaphysical determinations of truth'",<sup>114</sup> he rejects the conclusion of Kevin Hart's similar observations that Derrida's interest lies "only with discourses and in the conditions of knowledge"<sup>115</sup> and that he is, therefore, a Kantian idealist. Rayment-Pickard acknowledges a shift in Derrida's "theological mood" from "brooding grief" to "joyous feelings of attachment, if not love, for the lost object"<sup>116</sup> and focuses on the chiasmus which is "at the heart of Derrida's philosophy",<sup>117</sup> depicting it as the excessive, self-transcending nature of language which insists "within the space of deconstructed metaphysics".<sup>118</sup> Following Mark Taylor, he rather reductively subsumes Derrida's non-synonymous substitutions "under the title

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metaphysical thrust of apophaticism" see Rowan Williams, 'Hegel and the gods of postmodernity', in *Shadow of Spirit*, as before, pp. 72-80 (p. 77).

<sup>108</sup> Hart, *Trespass*, p. 198. See also his claim that "negative theology is a form of deconstruction" (p. 186), a position critiqued by Graham Ward who argues: "Negative theology is a language-use. Différance is a language-condition." Ward, p. 226.

<sup>109</sup> Hart, *Trespass*, p. 75.

<sup>110</sup> Hart, *Trespass*, p. 29.

<sup>111</sup> Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 5.

<sup>115</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 124.

<sup>116</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 146.

<sup>117</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 119.

<sup>118</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 162.

‘death’”.<sup>119</sup> Although the notion of ‘impossibility’ is central to his thesis then, he doesn’t fully explore its connection to ethical responsibility on Derrida.<sup>120</sup>

Observing the tension between philosophy and religion through the figure of the *adieu*, Hent de Vries’s *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* is perhaps the most comprehensive philosophical assessment of Derrida’s religious engagement. For de Vries, Derrida’s *adieu* establishes a position of simultaneous proximity and distance or ‘double movement’ in relation to the religious phenomena under discussion. Nonetheless, de Vries privileges the religious elements of deconstructive language, maintaining, for example, that “‘God’ is the best word for the trace, for its always necessary and possible erasure”,<sup>121</sup> as well as being the focus of Derrida’s studies of negative theology<sup>122</sup> and that which evokes “the very structure of experience, language, and thought, in general”.<sup>123</sup> De Vries’s insistence on the link between God and textuality is crucial, however, his deference towards Derrida causes him to overlook important tensions in Derrida’s work.

Although these religious readings of Derrida are diverse in style, aim and focus, they exhibit recurring features and limitations. Those readings which look to promote a certain type of religious engagement, such as the exegeses of Radical Orthodoxy thinkers, and to some extent, Ward, Hart, Smith, Caputo and Kearney, tend to skew Derrida’s work to this end, either overemphasising Derrida’s religious focus, identifying it with orthodox positions that Derrida would disavow, or trying to resolve deconstructive undecidability. Analyses from Biblical Studies or specifically Jewish readings tend to see how Derrida may illuminate their fields rather than aiming at mutual illumination. Other limitations include a keen interest in religion but little in God,<sup>124</sup> a lack of focus on the relationship between Derrida’s religious interest and issues of mode, genre, style and performativity, and, as de Vries and Caputo demonstrate, a frustrating reverence towards Derrida which limits exploration of the

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<sup>119</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> See for example, Derrida’s insistence that the impossibility of democracy means that one should “force oneself to achieve it”, Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michal Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 74.

<sup>121</sup> Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 94.

<sup>122</sup> De Vries, p. 27.

<sup>123</sup> De Vries, p. 67.

<sup>124</sup> Exceptions to this include Marius Timmann Mjaaland, David Wood and Rodolphe Gasché. See Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *Autopsia: Self, Death and God after Kierkegaard and Derrida*, trans. Brian McNeil (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); David Wood, “Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard”, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 53-74, and Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).



oeuvre's internal tensions and problems. This thesis endeavours to respond to some of these problems and limitations.

### 3. Outlining a Different Approach

In this thesis I aim to establish a decisive link between God and writing by exploring Derrida's investigation into, and transformation of, the concept of God in various later texts,<sup>125</sup> as well as his adoption of different modes and genres. Considering the characteristics of God as revealed by different discourses, I shall argue that rather than providing a stable definition or identity of God, they demonstrate the non self-identity of God and the irreducibility of God to a single model or tradition. Such a God would be dynamic and irrecoverable for ontotheology, dogma or institution. I shall maintain that Derrida's model of God, although connected to faith, does not and cannot constitute a religion, even a 'religion without religion' (as scholars such as John Caputo claim).<sup>126</sup>

Further, I shall examine the figure of God as an important site of tension within Derrida's work, which challenges the perceived relationships between ethics, religion, politics and subjectivity. Such conflict is often obscured by critics who assume the existence of a univocal and transparent 'ethical' or 'religious' turn in Derrida's work. Rather, Derrida's reformulation of God is inhibited by its potential discord with his political impulses. Derrida's model of God is radically interiorised, and focuses on the individual, ahistorical experience of faith and the constitution of subjectivity through this faith. Inescapably singular, the experience of faith appears to be in tension with the institutions it nonetheless founds and supports. It is, as Carl A. Raschke asserts, "the de-constituting sign... the grand *de-sign* within the economy of all 'world religions'".<sup>127</sup> At times, however, Derrida retreats from the tension between his 'religious' model of subjectivity and non-sovereign God and his broader socio-political vision, with references to the former in his political texts virtually non-existent.<sup>128</sup> This flight from the aporia is oddly undeconstructive. It overlooks the fact that the thinking of ethics, subjectivity, democracy and the bounds of the 'human' cannot

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<sup>125</sup> There are no clear and unequivocal divisions between Derrida's early, middle and late works. Here I use the phrase 'later texts' to refer to those published from about the late 1980s onwards.

<sup>126</sup> See John D. Caputo. *Prayers and Tears*.

<sup>127</sup> Carl A. Raschke, 'Derrida and the Return of Religion: Religious Theory after Postmodernism', *JCRT*, 6.2 (2005), 1-16 (p. 15).

<sup>128</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', trans. by Samuel Weber in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 42-101.

be accomplished without this reformulation of God, both as a rethinking of interiority through secrecy and non-sovereignty and as a refiguring of excessive yet immanent grounds of possibility.

I will approach Derrida's reconfiguration of God and its consequences through his adoption of different genres, as, I argue, not only is writing and textuality significant for Derrida, but the choice of genre carries a paradoxical responsibility.<sup>129</sup> In this way, my approach to his work will be determined by its own concerns, examining its preoccupations, methods and consistency on its own terms. Here, I shall briefly explain the importance of genre, mode and idiom for Derrida; these often overlooked elements will be central to my approach.

For Derrida, there is more than rhetoric or style at stake in the adoption of a genre. Rather, in *Learning to Live Finally* he maintains that "It is necessary in each situation to create an appropriate mode of exposition, to invent the law of the singular event, to take into account the presumed or desired addressee".<sup>130</sup> The increased performativity of Derrida's later texts and their corresponding self awareness magnifies this sense of responsibility.<sup>131</sup> In 'The Law of Genre', considering what is at stake in the allocation of genre, he offers alternative interpretive hypotheses on the following statements: "Genres are not to be mixed/I will not mix genres./I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them".<sup>132</sup> In the first hypothesis, the constative utterances describe "a practice, an act or event" and are ethically neutral; in the second, the statements are performative, and the sounding of the word genre creates "a limit" which is followed by ethical and juridical norms. Consequently, for Derrida, the constative and performative perspectives are connected by a mutual dependence, a "parasitical economy" which renders performativity

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<sup>129</sup> The meaning and significance of 'writing' and 'textuality' for Derrida is subject to much critical debate which I shall address in the course of the thesis.

<sup>130</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: An Interview with Jean Birnbaum*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Hoboken, NJ: Melville House Publishing, 2007), p. 31. On this see also his earlier assertion that "it is necessary to be prepared to invent the coming of a discourse capable of taking this into account", Jacques Derrida in Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue*, trans. by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 58.

<sup>131</sup> See Simon Critchley's claim that the change from early to late Derrida may be understood as a shift from the constative to the performative. Simon Critchley, *Ethics Politics Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 96. For a discussion of the potential problems of performativity, see Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 152.

<sup>132</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-252 (p. 223).

and its ethical implications inescapable.<sup>133</sup> Such responsibility would entail responding to particularity, yet is inevitably compromised by the generality of genre. However, Derrida demonstrates that the reductive and restrictive nature of generic boundaries i.e. the generality of genre, is however counterbalanced by its permeability.<sup>134</sup> Here he identifies a mark or trait which both enables genre and cannot be subsumed by it. Of this *écluse* he remarks: “The clause or floodgate of genre declasses what it allows to be classed”.<sup>135</sup> It thus protects singularity.

For Derrida, the responsibility to attend to singularity is also revealed by the possibility of the idiom,<sup>136</sup> which names an untranslatable singularity and “a purity which is not very pure... the only impure ‘purity’ for which I dare [he dares] confess a taste”.<sup>137</sup> Derrida demonstrates that the absolute idiom is always already compromised and contaminated by “a common language, concepts, laws, general norms”,<sup>138</sup> yet his precoccupation continues. This subsequent quest for the idiom permeates his writing, and the “unknown grammar”<sup>139</sup> which he foresees is associated with literature, God and the “paraph”<sup>140</sup> of autobiographical remembering. Such a quest for the singularity of the idiom accounts for his interests in writing and literature. Writing stages the encounter between the singular and the general, rendering reading “a mixed experience of the other in his or her singularity as well as philosophical content, information that can be torn out of this singular context. Both at the same time”.<sup>141</sup> Whereas philosophy denies its link to the idiom in order to preserve its appearance of universality, literature aspires to be idiomatic.<sup>142</sup> For

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<sup>133</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between the constative and the performative see Jacques Derrida, ‘Psyche: Invention of the Other’, trans. by Catherine Porter in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume 1*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 1-47.

<sup>134</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Right of Inspection*, photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart and trans. by David Wills (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998). Here Derrida discusses generic responsibility and the effects of inappropriate framing or narration with reference to the photographic novel. Identifying “the tug-of-war between the visible and the utterable”, Derrida observes the way that the imposition of a narrative mode stabilises and controls the meaning of the images, leaving no marker for that which could not be codified (not paginated).

<sup>135</sup> Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, pp. 221-252 (p. 231).

<sup>136</sup> Derrida is fascinated by this possibility, describing “this idiomatic writing whose purity, I realize, is inaccessible, but about which I continue to dream”. Jacques Derrida, ‘Unsealing (“the old new language”)', trans. by Peggy Kamuf in *Points*, as before, pp. 115-131 (p. 118).

<sup>137</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 47.

<sup>138</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘There is No One Narcissism’ (Autobiophotographies)’, trans. by Peggy Kamuf in *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994*, pp. 196-215 (p. 200).

<sup>139</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Circumfession’, in *Jacques Derrida*, ed. and trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 287.

<sup>140</sup> Derrida, ‘Unsealing (“the old new language”)', pp. 115-131 (p. 119).

<sup>141</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘There is No One Narcissism’ (Autobiophotographies)’, pp. 196-215 (p. 201).

<sup>142</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Passages- from Traumatism to Promise’, trans. by Peggy Kamuf in *Points*, pp. 372-395 (p. 374).

this reason, Derrida favours literary modes, valuing their proximity to singularity and to “the untranslatable”.<sup>143</sup> As the “absolute place of the secret of this heteronomy”,<sup>144</sup> literature is also a possible point of intersection between the interior space of subject formation and the public space of the ‘democracy to come’, and thus the disjunction between religion and politics.

Questions of genre and mode are also central to my study as they are, for Derrida, already linked to the meaning of ‘God’ and of the ‘name of God’. Indeed, for Derrida, the name of God is the paradigmatic idiom, which both forbids and commands translation,<sup>145</sup> historically authorizing a certain “Babelization”.<sup>146</sup> Further, God is the “ultimate addressee”,<sup>147</sup> and points towards a futural language, “the old new language”,<sup>148</sup> whose emergence I shall track as it develops through Derrida’s reconfiguration of the meaning of ‘God’. This language would be “not only the narration of a past that is inaccessible to me, but a narration that would also be a future, that would determine a future”.<sup>149</sup> Such an idiomatic language would contaminate modes, “accumulate and... mobilize a very large number of styles, genres, languages, levels”<sup>150</sup> and incorporate extra-linguistic modes<sup>151</sup> in order to experience the “Omnipotence-otherness”<sup>152</sup> of the text.

As I have shown, Derrida regards language and genre as productive and performative. Textuality, and in particular, the choice of an appropriate mode, provide a way to bear witness, and, as Paul Ricoeur describes, to “attend to singularity and give it expression”.<sup>153</sup> Given the central significance of textuality for Derrida, in this thesis, I shall track his engagement with the question of ‘God’ as it is expressed through different modes and genres, noting the significance of these changes to the issues raised and conclusions formed. The thesis will consist of four chapters which I shall now outline. Each will focus

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<sup>143</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. by Christie MacDonald and trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 148.

<sup>144</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius: The secrets of the archive*, trans. by Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 48.

<sup>145</sup> Derrida declares that “God himself is in the double bind”, Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 102.

<sup>146</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>147</sup> Derrida is here referring to confession. Jacques Derrida, ‘The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano’, trans. by Gil Anidjar in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 191-227 (p. 208).

<sup>148</sup> Derrida, ‘Unsealing (“the old new language”)', pp. 115-131 (p. 119).

<sup>149</sup> Derrida, “‘There is No *One* Narcissism” (Autobiophotographies)', pp. 196-215 (p. 207).

<sup>150</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘Dialanguages”', trans. by Peggy Kamuf in *Points*, pp. 132-155 (p. 142).

<sup>151</sup> For Derrida, the idiomatic “is not necessarily on the order of language in the phonic sense but may be on the order of a gesture, a physical association, a scene of some sort, a taste, a smell”, Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 106.

<sup>152</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, p. 53.

<sup>153</sup> Paul Ricoeur, ‘Philosophy after Kierkegaard’, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 9-25 (p. 21).

on a genre which is employed and examined repeatedly in Derrida's later work; these are confession, dialogue, silence, and reason.

Beginning with a review of three current readings of 'Circumfession', Chapter One focuses on Derrida's engagement with the explicitly religious genre of confession, arguing that these exegeses, singularly philosophical, religious and literary, overlook both the importance of contamination in the text, and the significance of writing. In contrast, I develop an interdisciplinary analysis which tracks Derrida's 'double reading' of confession as it simultaneously reinforces and subverts the strictly maintained yet unsustainable economies of confessional structure, confessional subject and the figure of God. This 'double reading', I contend, consists of a confession of deconstruction's alliance with textuality, and a deconstruction of God and the subject, which are rewritten according to their dynamism and non-identity. Consequently, the God which emerges from the text is not a stabilising figure of positive infinity, as inherited from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but a God aligned with the shifting possibilities of language and grammar. In the final part of the chapter, I turn to 'Envois', a text whose supplementary use of the confessional mode reinforces Derrida's 'double reading', and begins to examine both the political implications of confession, and the relationships between ethics and politics, and interior and exterior.

In the two central chapters of the thesis I explore deconstruction's relationship with negative theology, beginning with a brief excursus in which I argue that current accounts of this relationship pay little attention to the crucial concerns of mode and genre. The chapters, 'Dialogue' and 'Silence', look to remedy this problem, and in so doing, to develop a fuller understanding of what is at stake with these linguistic concerns.

Chapter Two asserts the importance of dialogue in Derrida's work, both in understanding the movements of deconstruction, and in formulating its impact on the relationships between ethics, politics and religion. I begin by responding to the question of a religious 'turn', here exemplified by Slavoj Žižek's claim that Derrida's later work betrays *différance*. I argue that the dialogical movements which comprise *différance* testify to a structural consistency which destabilizes the idea of a 'turn', undermining Žižek's position, as well as Arthur Bradley's more nuanced critique. In the second part of the chapter I read

the “fictive dialogue”<sup>154</sup> ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’ as an expression of the similarities between deconstruction and negative theology, and as an examination of the possibility of a “*post-writing*”<sup>155</sup> which would facilitate the articulation of non-ontotheological conceptions of God. Finally, I return to the concerns articulated by Bradley and Žižek, arguing- contra these critics- that Derrida’s ‘post-writing’ and reconfiguration of God look to uphold the undecidability between ethics and politics without sacrificing the urgency of the political.

Progressing from the dialogical mode to the complementary mode of silence, Chapter Three analyses ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ and *The Gift of Death* arguing that Derrida assumes the apophatic mode of ‘avoiding speaking’, a way of preserving silence through language. This mode, I argue, which Derrida frames through the idea of the promise, draws out the similarities between negative theology and deconstruction, and enables Derrida to clarify the relationship between God and language. Turning to *The Gift of Death*, I argue that Derrida again aligns himself with linguistic silence. This mode is allied with the processes of being ‘in secret’ and of bearing witness to a conception of God which is rooted in the tensions and paradoxes of language itself. In the final section I examine emerging tensions in Derrida’s account: within the concept of God; between public and private; and between ethics and religion, and ask to what extent these tensions are resolved by Derrida’s ‘double reading’.

The final chapter, ‘Reason’, centres on ‘Faith and Knowledge: On the Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’. First, I track Derrida’s argument that the discourses of religion and reason are internally contaminated and mutually dependent and consider his revision of reason, in particular the contention that it names the irreducible, non-economic relationship between calculation and the incalculable and provides the impetus for the ‘Enlightenment to come’. Next, I argue that Derrida’s emphasis on the political, through which he yokes together the futures of reason and religion in ‘Faith and Knowledge’, is accompanied by a suspension of the question of God. This, I argue, results in an undeconstructive tension between the private and the political, potentially sustaining the disjunction between religion and politics. Looking to respond to this tension, I turn to the work of Richard Rorty, outlining his defence of the division between public and private and his analysis of Derrida. Assessing his claims, I contend that Derrida’s accounts of literature

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<sup>154</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Sauf le le nom (Post Scriptum)’, trans. by John P. Leavey Jr. in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 33-85 (p. 34).

<sup>155</sup> Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom’, pp. 35-85 (p. 53).

and of 'post-writing' offer a possible resolution to this tension, in both bridging the opposition between public and private, and challenging the very terms of the debate.

In the concluding section of the thesis, I reiterate the mutual dependence of God and writing in Derrida's later work, and the heterogeneity and non-sovereignty of the God which emerges from Derrida's variant discourses. Finally, I gesture towards some of the broader implications of this conception of God: for accounts of human and non-human subjectivity and relationality; and for the intersection between religion, ethics and politics in deconstruction and beyond.

## Chapter One: Confession

There is a memory, a history, and an archive of confession, a genealogy of confessions: of the word 'confession', of the rather late Christian institution that bears this name, but also of the works that, in the West, are registered under this title.

Jacques Derrida

The stroke of conversion is not one single blow delivered once and for all; it is not a shower of repeated blows either. No, confessional writing bears the fissure along with it.

Jean-François Lyotard

... everything awaits the testimony of the self, of the other, of the self as other even to itself. This circumstance is exemplified by the homage Derrida seems to pay to the confessional genre in *Glas*, *The Postcard*, 'Before the Law', 'Schibboleth', and 'Circumfession'.

Hent de Vries

### 1. Introduction

"I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself has seen it, Eternal Being!"<sup>156</sup> Rousseau famously declares at the opening of his *Confessions*, a declaration which immediately addresses the questions of interiority, subjectivity and divine alterity which encircle confessional discourse and trouble Derrida in his reading of it. Rousseau's text, and the relationship between writing and subjectivity emerge as concerns in *Of Grammatology*, however it is in later texts, for example 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)' and the self-consciously autobiographical 'Circumfession', in which the confessional itself becomes the primary focus. In this chapter, primarily through a reading of 'Circumfession', I shall examine Derrida's engagement with this explicitly religious genre in order to perceive how Derrida inhabits and challenges confession, exposes its inner contradictions, and undertakes a deconstructive 'double reading' which simultaneously reinforces and destabilises the confessional economy. Exploring this 'double reading', I shall consider the significance of confession for deconstruction, and consider how this discourse may illuminate a deconstructive understanding of God and religion.

First, assessing three current readings of 'Circumfession', I shall argue that singularly philosophical, religious or literary exegeses overlook both the importance of contamination in the text, and the significance of writing. In contrast, I shall develop an interdisciplinary reading, which, for example, considers the ambivalent reliance of religious confession on

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<sup>156</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. by J. M. Cohen, rev. edn (London: Penguin Classics, 1970), p. 17.



literary techniques. My reading will track Derrida's 'double reading' of confession as it probes the strictly maintained economies of confessional structure, confessional subject and the figure of God and reveals the confessional tendency to suppress inconsistencies and stabilise identities, as well as deconstruction's own alliance with a certain textuality or "athetic writing".<sup>157</sup>

Analysing confession and circumcision as figures of purity, Derrida uncovers difference, impropriety and contamination and reveals the confessional tendency to suppress inconsistencies and present an inaccurate appearance of stabilised identities. Despite striving for independence, consistency and unity, however, the confessional narrative is fragmented, and, as Jean-François Lyotard maintains, "bears the fissure along with it".<sup>158</sup> This artificial closure is, ironically, antithetical to the coming of God, and Derrida's alternative, excessive confession aims to discover that which is restricted by traditional models of confession. This would include both a non self-identical subjectivity, and, correspondingly, a God other than the positive infinity of Judaeo-Christian tradition and time-honoured confessional narrative, a God aligned with the shifting possibilities of language and grammar. For Derrida, I assert, the processes of writing are central to this reworking of both God and subject. In the last part of this chapter, I shall turn to 'Envois', a text whose supplementary use of the confessional mode reinforces Derrida's 'double reading' of the confessional, again associating a rethinking of God and the subject with a new way of writing. Further, I consider 'Envois' explicitly politicised assessments of the distinction between legal and religious confession, and "the public/private opposition",<sup>159</sup> and argue that although 'Envois' enacts the formation of the political, it leaves the relationships between ethics, politics and a new 'athetic writing' and conception of God, relatively unexplored.

## 2. Reading 'Circumfession'

Forming part of a volume co-authored with Geoffrey Bennington, 'Circumfession' consists of 59 numbered entries which, explicitly autobiographical and unpredictably singular, are aimed to short-circuit Bennington's attempt to formalise Derrida's thought into a program or system. Although the texts were not written collaboratively, the writers assert that the

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<sup>157</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Notices (Warnings)', in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 259-291 (p. 268).

<sup>158</sup> Jean François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, trans. by Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

<sup>159</sup> Gregory Ulmer, 'The Post-Age', *Diacritics*, 11 (Autumn 1981), 39-56 (p. 46).

book “presupposes a contract”,<sup>160</sup> however this ‘contract’ is competitive, with Derrida searching for “sentences fit to crack open the geologic program”.<sup>161</sup>

‘Circumfession’ is strongly influenced by Augustine’s *Confessions* and challenges assumptions about the nature of confession throughout, yet critics remain divided as to whether it is essentially a confessional text. David Farrell Krell’s insistence that “it is not meant to be a literary or theological confession... however much it may harp on divinity”,<sup>162</sup> contrasts with John Caputo’s claim that the text is “more radically confessional than Augustine’s *Confessions*,” Derrida’s words “more wounded”.<sup>163</sup> Similarly, Jeremy Tambling suggests that “even if the confession is parodic, it still reads as confession”.<sup>164</sup> It is Derrida himself who releases us from this critical deadlock in which a text must either wholly accept or reject a genre. Speaking of genre elsewhere he argues that a generic label- there, the *récit*- names “a current mode of discourse, and it does so regardless of the formidable problems of structure, edge, set theory, the part and whole etc., that it raises in this ‘literary’ corpus”.<sup>165</sup> So, rather than trying to conclusively establish whether or not ‘Circumfession’ is a confession, we might ask how and why it partakes in the confessional mode and what the implications of this might be.

### (a) Three Current Readings

‘Circumfession’ both reproduces elements of familiar modes and strives towards an “idiomatic writing”<sup>166</sup> to express the singularity of experience. However, this desire for the “impure ‘purity’”,<sup>167</sup> of the idiom, is, like the religious rituals of purity Derrida depicts,

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<sup>160</sup> Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, ed. and trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>161</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Circumfession’, in *Jacques Derrida* (as above), p. 124. Further references are given after quotations in the text. ‘Circumfession’ is, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “the contradiction at the foot of a book, as a running unconnected footnote to the project of fixing the nature of the patronymic once and for all”. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Notes toward a Tribute to Jacques Derrida’, in *Differences: Derrida’s Gift*, 16.3 (2005), 102-113 (p. 107).

<sup>162</sup> David Farrell Krell, *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p. 192.

<sup>163</sup> John D. Caputo, ‘Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida’s Confession of Prayer’, in *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 103.

<sup>164</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin and the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 100.

<sup>165</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, trans. by Avital Ronell in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-252 (p. 240).

<sup>166</sup> ‘Unsealing (“the old new language”)', trans. by Peggy Kamuf in *Points*, pp. 115-131(p. 118).

<sup>167</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 47.

always undermined by contamination. Consequently, ‘pure’ readings of ‘Circumfession’ which endeavour to interpret the text through one mode or genre are inevitably ineffective, and fail to respond to the interdependency and contamination between discourses, and, in particular, the significance of ‘writing’ in Derrida’s text. I shall demonstrate this by examining three examples of ‘pure’ readings. The first two, by Martin Hägglund and John Caputo, respectively focusing on the philosophical and theological elements of the text, overlook both the contamination of these elements and the function of ‘writing’. The final reading, by Robert Smith, focuses on the literary and investigates the significance of ‘writing’ for Derrida, without reading it in the context of Derrida’s broader political, ethical, philosophical and theological concerns. Aiming to avoid the limitations of such readings, I shall try and situate Derrida’s ‘writing’ both within these wider concerns and through the contamination of discourses which ‘Circumfession’ reveals to be inevitable.

First, I shall consider Martin Hägglund’s philosophical approach, which looks to regenerate philosophical interest in Derrida’s work and reclaim it from ethical and religious scholarship.<sup>168</sup> Hägglund depicts Derrida’s work as the affirmation of mortal survival, a ‘radical atheism’ which rejects even the desire for God and immortality, and is thus incompatible with “wrongheaded”<sup>169</sup> religious readings. Opposing himself to religious thinkers who stress the influence of Augustine, Hägglund’s reading of ‘Circumfession’ inverts this, claiming that Derrida deconstructs the *Confessions* and mobilizes the radically atheist elements already at work in Augustine’s text. Hägglund’s approach is “analytical rather than exegetical”,<sup>170</sup> and this philosophical focus, I contend, restricts his textual analyses, which overlook the contamination of deconstruction by other genres and discourses.

Mistakenly characterising Derrida’s approach to Augustine as purely negative, Hägglund claims that by exposing how Augustine contravenes the notion of God as “timeless eternity”,<sup>171</sup> Derrida reveals the ‘radical atheism’ at the heart of Augustine’s Christian position. Similarly, whereas Augustine’s text dramatizes the tension between desire for mortal pleasure and survival, and desire for immortality, coming to favour the

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<sup>168</sup> Hägglund’s reclamation of Derrida is marked by a note of urgency, even desperation; see for example, his reference to “passages in Derrida that cannot be salvaged by the logic of radical atheism”, Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

<sup>169</sup> Hägglund, p. 116.

<sup>170</sup> Hägglund, p. 11.

<sup>171</sup> Hägglund, p. 153.

latter, Hägglund perceives a simple reversal in 'Circumfession' depicting the text as an unrepentant display of mortal desires. This is a reductive account of Derrida's ambivalence towards Augustine's text.

Hägglund understands God as a 'positive infinity', external to the text and represented by the 'theologic program' which Bennington writes and 'Circumfession' aims to exceed. Derrida, Hägglund claims, "glosses 'God' as the idea that death cannot put an end to *the* world- to the true and ultimate world- even if it puts an end to the mortal world of a singular living being".<sup>172</sup> This reductive definition is in fact inconsistent with Derrida's extensive attempts to investigate the question of God in his later work. Deconstruction's disruption of the 'positive infinity' of God is a point of divergence between Derrida and Hägglund: whereas the latter perceives it as an endpoint for religious thinking, demanding a sharpened focus on and celebration of the desire for mortal survival, Derrida instead sees an opening or intensification of religious thinking for deconstruction. Another oversimplification of Derrida's approach is found in Hägglund's discussion of mourning through the notion of "radical finitude".<sup>173</sup> He writes: "Derrida's reflections on mourning always proceed from the absolute destructibility of life; from the 'incinerating blaze' and 'terrible light' that reveals that the dead other is no longer and will never be again".<sup>174</sup> This is a distorted account of Derrida's consideration of mourning, as it disregards the insistence of the trace and Derrida's disruption of the Freudian economy of mourning.

More broadly, in declining the narrative of an 'ethical turn', Hägglund promises a corrective to the simplistic conflation of Derrida and Levinas. However, although he begins to consider their differing approaches to otherness, non-violence and the structure of the trace, Hägglund's analysis is predominantly derived from 'Violence and Metaphysics' and fails to track the changing influence of Levinas on Derrida. This, alongside his insufficiently supported claim that, despite Derrida's use of "'positively' valorized" terms such as 'justice' and 'hospitality', alterity is an ethically neutral effect of the ultratranscendental status of *différance*, means that in Hägglund's work, deconstruction's complex relation to ethics remains unexpressed.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Hägglund, p. 111.

<sup>173</sup> Hägglund, p. 162.

<sup>174</sup> Hägglund, p. 162.

<sup>175</sup> Hägglund, p. 105.

Nathan Brown argues that “the admirable clarity of Hägglund’s book makes all too glaring how little remains when Derrida’s sprawling oeuvre is pared down to the core.”<sup>176</sup> Instead, I would argue that this paucity is due to Hägglund’s limited if rigorous philosophical reading of Derrida’s multidimensional oeuvre and that at work both in Hägglund’s book and Brown’s review- despite both in some ways being highly Derridean- is a concept of philosophy which remains narrow and untouched by Derrida’s writing. Despite endorsing Derrida’s rebuttal of sovereignty, Hägglund is either neglectful of or hostile towards the contamination of philosophy by other discourses and the ways in which this is examined and incorporated in varying ways throughout Derrida’s work, and specifically in ‘Circumfession’.

A contrast to Hägglund’s account is found in John D. Caputo’s inherently religious reading of Derrida’s work. Caputo, who for Hägglund is “the most powerful proponent”<sup>177</sup> of ‘wrongheaded’ religious readings of Derrida,<sup>178</sup> regards ‘Circumfession’ as “the most interesting and provocative of all of Derrida’s texts”,<sup>179</sup> and makes it central to his claim that Derrida is a religious thinker. He argues that ‘Circumfession’ forces us to “think out” Derrida’s “private religion”.<sup>180</sup> However, noting the text’s “formidable difficulty”,<sup>181</sup> Caputo retreats from offering an extended reading, shifting from strong claims<sup>182</sup> to vague description<sup>183</sup> and suggesting that such a reading would be impossible as “The text disseminates in so many directions... as to make nonsense of the idea of a definitive commentary”.<sup>184</sup> He thus abdicates any responsibility for “getting this text right”.<sup>185</sup> Concepts such as ‘private religion’ and ‘Derrida’s religion’ are not explicitly developed, and, although evangelical about the religious in general, Caputo is reluctant to declare his own religious affiliations and to situate the claims he makes about Derrida. Some elucidation is offered as Caputo concludes by allying Derrida’s God with that of the prophets. He reveals:

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<sup>176</sup> Nathan Brown, ‘To live without an idea’, *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March/April 2009), 51-3 (p. 53).

<sup>177</sup> Hägglund, p. 116.

<sup>178</sup> For an alternative perspective see Thomas A. Carlson, [untitled], *The Journal of Religion*, 79.1 (January 1999), 151-3.

<sup>179</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 285.

<sup>180</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 285.

<sup>181</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 285.

<sup>182</sup> See for example Caputo’s claim that ‘Circumfession’ is “the surprising story of Derrida’s conversion from these secular texts and languages to a certain Hebrew, to his life of faith and passion, of prayers and tears”, Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 285.

<sup>183</sup> Examples of this include Caputo’s hesitant reference to Derrida’s “quasi-Augustinian, slightly atheistic Judaism”, Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 284.

<sup>184</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 285.

<sup>185</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 285.

I have all along been trying to cross the wires of deconstruction with this prophetic tradition, to *ally* Derrida's passion for the impossible within a prophetic passion, to trace out a *new alliance* between the God of Derrida, 'my God,' with what Heschel calls the God of pathos, the passion *of* God...<sup>186</sup>

Caputo's intermittent yet insistent association between Derrida and the 'prophetic tradition' provides fodder for critics to assume his orthodoxy, yet is insufficiently developed to offer a full theological account of Derrida's work.

One important area, neglected by Hägglund, on which Caputo focuses, is the question of the 'name of God'. He repeatedly asks "What do I love when I love my God?"<sup>187</sup> the question he perceives as linking the confessions of Augustine and Derrida, and he acknowledges Derrida's rejection of ontotheology, asserting that Derrida "by no means passes for an atheist about every God".<sup>188</sup> In tracking Derrida's use of the 'name of God', Caputo imitates Derrida's style, aiming to replicate the way 'Circumfession' interrupts totalising systems. However, Caputo's resistance to argumentative structure, or a working definition of terms- particularly God, 'name of God', and religion- isn't combined with the performative 'working through' which motivates Derrida's text, and merely results in a frustrating rejection of a clearly-defined position or argument. Similarly, in repudiating a philosophical approach, Caputo favours description over analysis and his refusal to process, connect or question the dispersed ideas of God he presents, results in a lack of clarity.<sup>189</sup> Further, his definitions of God, and his focus on "praying and weeping"<sup>190</sup> fail to verify the claim that Derrida is involved in the highly programmatic "project of the reconstitution of the structure of religion".<sup>191</sup> These sporadic attempts to associate Derrida with revelation or institutional religion are inconsistent with 'Circumfession's' deconstructive tendencies. Caputo asserts that "the name of God is a way to keep things open, to open them up to what eye hath not seen nor ear heard, to hope for and believe impossible things..."<sup>192</sup> yet here the 'openness' of the name of God is rather restricted by the Scriptural reference to Corinthians.

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<sup>186</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 337.

<sup>187</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 286.

<sup>188</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 288.

<sup>189</sup> See for example, his description of God as "the nameless who-knows-what to whom one confesses plainly that one is cut adrift, destitute, a little lost, and maybe not a little", Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 291.

<sup>190</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 292.

<sup>191</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 294.

<sup>192</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 287.

In fact, Caputo's agenda, the conflation of Derrida's God with that of Scripture impedes the openness inherent to Derrida's work.<sup>193</sup>

Caputo's religious focus leads him to downplay both Derrida's engagement with philosophical logic and the importance of writing, genre and language for Derrida's understanding of God.<sup>194</sup> His rejection of a philosophical approach leads to a sycophantic relationship with Derrida's work which avoids a faithfully deconstructive examination of its tensions, for example the unresolved relations between ethics, religion and responsibility or the shifting sense of the name of God. This lack of emphasis on language and the literary is supplemented by an overemphasis on Derrida's biography, for example whereas Caputo reduces Derrida's interest to his complex relationship to his "mother tongue",<sup>195</sup> it is clear that the specificity of Derrida's situation serves rather to demonstrate certain conditions of language in general.

In contrast, Robert Smith's literary reading starts from a perceived neglect of writing, which, he argues, has occurred "logically" and "historically".<sup>196</sup> He looks to challenge this, asserting: "Perhaps, incredibly, life has an essential link with writing; a thought of writing and the trace is the only condition on which life death can be thought out..."<sup>197</sup> Smith perceives the fragmented self of Derridean autobiography as "an irritant" to philosophical reason, with his own text pursuing a self-consciously literary style.<sup>198</sup> Whilst some critics regard Smith's text as a philosophical response to Derrida, it seems to me that Smith's philosophical gestures and interests are often deliberately compromised by his style.<sup>199</sup>

Smith's mode is expansive. Like 'Circumfession', his account looks to escape that which is programmatic and systematic, embracing tangent and exception and rejecting the hierarchical or structured revelation of information. Writing is regarded as the possibility of chance, singularity and escaping the 'program'. In this, it represents for Smith the

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<sup>193</sup> Caputo claims that "Derrida is somewhat closer to the Bible-thumpers than to the endowed chairs of religious studies", Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 289.

<sup>194</sup> He suggests that "'God' is a name for the inextinguishable textuality of his life and work", however fails to justify or develop this claim. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 289.

<sup>195</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 304-5.

<sup>196</sup> Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 172.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Smith, p. 172.

<sup>198</sup> Robert Smith, p. 5.

<sup>199</sup> Henry Sussman regards Smith's work as inherently philosophical, whereas Thomas Docherty asserts that "Robert Smith's book... has pretensions to a philosophical exactitude and seriousness it fails to realize". See Henry Sussman, [untitled], *MLN*, 110.4 (September 1995), 957-60 (p. 958), and Thomas Docherty, [untitled], *The Modern Language Review*, 92.2 (April 1997), 419-20 (p. 419). For an additional critical response, see Sarah Wood, 'Let's Start Again', *Diacritics*, 29.1 (Spring 1999), 4-19.

impossibility of an ontotheological God, as such a structure “interrupts presence *per se* and with it the capacity for a god in perpetual presence to permeate it”.<sup>200</sup> However, Smith, like Hägglund, has a reductive approach to the figure of God, and fails to examine the generative relationship between God and writing in Derrida’s late work, reducing God to ontotheology, and crudely perceiving religion as “the fantasy of the immortal parent”.<sup>201</sup>

Smith’s assessment of Augustine’s role in ‘Circumfession’ highlights the tension between the literary and the religious within the genres of autobiography and confession. Whereas religious confession must be programmatic, predictable and controlled, simulating performativity and rejecting chance, the literary “emblematises chance” and therefore, employing a literary mode entails “an assumed admission of the chanciness, the erroneous and wayward determination so lefthandedly governing one’s life” and thus necessarily challenges the narrative of a life determined by an omnipotent God.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Smith observes a dialectical structure in religious confessions, epitomised by Augustine’s text which “posits the (negative) sin that will be negated by the positive goodness of confessing it in order to be identified”.<sup>203</sup> The purity and predictability of this resolution is sacrificed in the literary confession, which always maintains an openness to the other. As a consequence, although Augustine employs literary devices and modes to enhance the *Confessions*, the literary as representative of alterity and chance, is demonised, and the text is paradoxically “a narrative that blames narrative (literature)”.<sup>204</sup> By foregrounding this tension between the religious and the literary within the confessional, Smith reveals the importance of thinking through both when interpreting ‘Circumfession’, thus exposing the limitations of his own account.

Smith argues that autobiographical writing generates a rethinking of the subject in its relation to life and death. Writing provides a place or enables a process in which the figures of power are immobilised or neutralised, disrupting the dominance of the writing subject and the Freudian account of mourning.<sup>205</sup> Smith quotes David Wood:

The words ‘life’ and ‘death’ are, in this very movement, transformed, and their opposition subverted. Dispersion, *différance*, mark the end of a certain illusion of

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<sup>200</sup> Robert Smith, p. 42.

<sup>201</sup> Robert Smith, p. 42.

<sup>202</sup> Robert Smith, p. 46.

<sup>203</sup> Robert Smith, p. 47.

<sup>204</sup> Robert Smith, p. 46.

<sup>205</sup> Freudian mourning would have the subject or writing self, ‘devour’ and incorporate the object or written self. Here however, the processes of writing enable an encounter where both are continually dynamic or surviving subjects.



life that we call self-presence. What this opens up is the possibility of a re-inscription, a re-working, of these values within the general problematic of writing.<sup>206</sup>

The question of 'writing' therefore, cannot be reduced to the simply literary, but engages with and destabilises religious and philosophical assumptions, consequently disrupting singularly philosophical or religious interpretations of 'Circumfession', for example Hägglund's reduction of the text to the 'radically atheist' desire for mortal survival. Smith reveals how 'Circumfession' illustrates the power and potential of writing, yet the limited, literary nature of his reading cannot fully explore the ethical, political, philosophical and religious implications of this insight. He claims that writing disturbs self-presence, self-identity, and the human relation to death, thus challenging traditional conceptions of the subject. He concludes that "The human must be reformulated according to the very thing which exceeds it, namely the autobiographic function of writing, which writes itself and whose structure takes the form of an inability to be reduced to an end".<sup>207</sup> Smith realises the significance of writing yet his imperative lacks the investigation of ethical and religious responsibility in 'Circumfession'. Further, his emphasis on the human both reinforces the unDerridean binary between human and non-human animals, and overlooks the religious element of the confessional, in particular, Derrida's reformulation of the concept of God.

The three readings that I have presented are all limited by their 'pure' accounts of a text which foregrounds the impossibility of purity and the dangers of pursuing it. Beginning with confession and circumcision, "rites" which "owe it to themselves to resemble, belonging to the family, the genre" (132-3), and are thus associated with the proper, pure and self-same, and exploring them through the confessional genre, Derrida uncovers difference, impropriety and contamination. His examination of the multivalent figure of confession and its philosophical, religious, legal and literary associations and implications, as well as that which it suppresses, requires a reading which tracks this contaminatory mode. Consequently, my reading of 'Circumfession' will focus on the way Derrida exposes contamination and difference, revealing the economy of confession to be inherently interruptive, therefore posing a challenge to its own structural closure. Further, responding to the way in which the aforementioned readings overlook the centrality of 'writing', or fail

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<sup>206</sup> Robert Smith, p. 132.

<sup>207</sup> Robert Smith, p. 191.

to situate it, I will demonstrate that ‘writing’ is crucial for Derrida’s development of both a subject and a model of God, which too are impure and non self-identical. The relation between these, in part developed in ‘Circumfession’, is, I shall later argue, crucial for thinking through the relationship between politics and deconstruction.

## **(b) Contamination and Non-Sovereignty: Rereading ‘Circumfession’**

Focusing on Derrida’s treatment of the confessional mode, my reading will draw out both Derrida’s subversion or deconstruction of key features of the genre, and his own exploration, even confession, of deconstruction’s relationship with writing and textuality. The efficacy of confession depends on a tightly controlled, yet, as Derrida demonstrates, unsustainable, economy. My reading will be divided into three sections, showing how Derrida’s text explores and questions this economy as it is expressed through the confessional structure, confessional subject, and finally, the God of confession.

### **(i) The Confessional Structure**

The term ‘confession’ has wide-ranging associations, referring to elements as varied as a religious sacrament, a legal declaration and a written document, variously religious, literary, or philosophical.<sup>208</sup> This multiplicity of meanings is one source of attraction for Derrida, who explores the tensions between the term’s different uses, for example the religious and legal in ‘Envois’, and the religious and literary in ‘Circumfession’. Dependent on the context, the term ‘confession’ creates highly specific expectations, and it is these which ‘Circumfession’ looks to challenge.

In *Without Alibi*, Derrida defines religious confession as the “confession of sin and the profession of faith”.<sup>209</sup> This depiction of confession as a bipartite process which pivots on a conversional moment or turn accords with the definitions of other thinkers, for example that of Jan Johnson, who observes “Confession followed by prayer”,<sup>210</sup> and that of Dunstan

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<sup>208</sup> This is reflected in the literature and commentary written on ‘confession’ which incorporates religious texts, including histories of the sacrament and dogmatic guides, literary analyses and sociological and historical studies of religious and legal models of confession.

<sup>209</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. and ed. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 90.

<sup>210</sup> Jan Johnson, *Reflection and Confession* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 28.

Adam, for whom confession is “the sacrament of return and renewal”.<sup>211</sup> This model is found in Luther who claims that “Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the confessor as from God himself...”<sup>212</sup> This structure creates a strict confessional economy.

Religious confession is always addressed to God, however, a representative of God may be required as confessor, be it a priest in the case of the sacrament, or the reading community in its reception of a written text. The singular address to God is, therefore, more often divided. In linking the individual subject to the religious community, the confessional process bridges the private and public elements of religion. However, some critics have perceived an internalisation of the confessional process which has devalued the role of the community. Jan Johnson, for example, critiques the “individualistic mindset inherent in Western culture”,<sup>213</sup> and Terence Doody insists that “Confession is always an act of community”<sup>214</sup> and, reading twentieth century fiction, suggests that “the ‘disappearance’ of the confessor from their [Camus, Sartre, Bellow and Ellison] narratives suggests how deeply narcissism infects the twentieth century”.<sup>215</sup> I shall return to this question of the privatisation of religious experience when I examine the tension between religion and politics in Derrida.

The confessional text enacts a process described in ‘Faith and Knowledge: On the Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone’. Derrida argues that there are two different but connected experiences of the religious: the idea of the proper or unscathed, which sustains its value and uniqueness by securing its purity and self-identity, and the experience of faith or belief which depends on the testimony of the other.<sup>216</sup> Derrida goes on to describe how these two experiences of religion always contaminate each other, despite the fact that one is an experience of purity itself. Likewise, Derrida shows how confession is both internally and externally contaminated. The title, ‘Circumfession’, entails an explicit comparison and ultimately, contamination, between purifying rites from the Christian and

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<sup>211</sup> Dunstan Adams, *Me Accuse Myself? Confession and Reconciliation: FAQs for the Confused* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2003), p. 40.

<sup>212</sup> Luther cited in David Belgum, *Guilt: Where Psychology and Religion Meet* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 76.

<sup>213</sup> Johnson, p. 27.

<sup>214</sup> Terence Doody, *Confession and Community in the Novel* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 4.

<sup>215</sup> Doody, p. 95.

<sup>216</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’, trans. by Samuel Weber in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 70.

Judaic traditions.<sup>217</sup> Both, Derrida says “...owe it to themselves to resemble, belonging to the family, the genre” (133). However, the contamination suggested by the title is borne out in the text and is compounded by the contradictions which Derrida reveals as internal to the concepts of both confession and circumcision. In the case of circumcision, these become evident in Derrida’s definition, given in ‘Shibboleth (for Paul Celan)’. He describes:

1. The cut, which incises the male sexual member, cuts into it, then turns around to form a circumvenient ring;
2. A name given to the moment of covenant or alliance and of legitimate entry into the community: a *shibboleth* that cuts and partitions, then distinguishes, for example, by virtue of the language and the name given to each of them, one circumcision from another, the Jewish operation from the Egyptian operation from which it is said to derive, or indeed, the Muslim operation that resembles it, or many others.
3. The experience of blessing and of purification<sup>218</sup>

Derrida depicts circumcision as a liminal figure, operating between inclusion and exclusion, purity and contamination. This divided significance is observed by Joseph Kronick, for whom circumcision is both “a mark of the eternal recurrence of the same” and “the elliptical sign of *différance* between self and other, the mark that the self falls short of self identity”,<sup>219</sup> and by John Caputo, who observes “...two kinds or figures of circumcision... a Ulyssean, circumnavigational circumcision, which closes the circle of the same, and an Abrahamic circumcision, which cuts the cord of the same in order to be open to the other”.<sup>220</sup> This double movement, by which circumcision enacts both openness and closure recalls the doubling of deconstruction, and the motif of circling, which, as Derrida employs it in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, illustrates the mutual dependence of the economic and non-economic.<sup>221</sup> Here, in ‘Circumfession’, Derrida demonstrates that confession and circumcision, both representative of purity, are inevitably internally contaminated. This internal contamination is compounded by the “*heterogeneous modes*” (154) of the text and the contamination between the rites. Derrida acknowledges “the thousands of years of Judaism” (153) and that he writes from “deep in the history of penitence” (86), yet these

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<sup>217</sup> Derrida asserts that “*the circumcised is the proper*”. Derrida, ‘Circumfession’, p. 154.

<sup>218</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Shibboleth (for Paul Celan)’, in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 1-64 (p. 55).

<sup>219</sup> Joseph G. Kronick, ‘Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida’, *MLN*, 115.5 (December 2000), 997-1018 (p. 1006).

<sup>220</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 257.

<sup>221</sup> Examples of this motif in ‘Circumfession’ include: “No point in going round in circles” (p. 55); “circumpletes” (15); “turning in circles around me” (p. 3); and “circumbygone”, (p. 13).

become merged and disrupted in the text, for example in the reference to circumcision in Eucharistic terms as “this incredible supper of wine and blood” (153).

This contamination between confession and circumcision, and Derrida’s writing of a Jewish autobiography and confession,<sup>222</sup> situate him on the very limits of both Jewish and confessional traditions. With the latter, he is akin to Augustine, who “probably never confessed” (86) in the contemporary sense of the word. Both writers however, are engaged in “working at the delivery of literary confessions, i.e. at a form of theology as autobiography” (86-7). Derrida draws out this tension between the literary and the theological, the “contradiction between spontaneity and compulsion”,<sup>223</sup> throughout his reading of Augustine. It seems that the two poles are irreconcilable as the same writer asserts that “Confession must be from the unconscious” (233) whilst later considering “how to bring off a confession” (267). This tension is exhibited in Derrida’s manipulation of the structure of the confessional narrative, which, as illustrated by the *Confessions*, orients around a conversional turn which is prefigured by other minor turns. Jill Robbins claims that Augustine uses this structure to literary effect:

Augustine understood his own conversion as an imitative relationship to previous pious models (of imitation). His spiritual autobiography is organized- rhetorically as well as theologically- around internal correspondences: *p*erversion, *a*version, *a*dversion, *r*eversion, *e*version. These false turns serve to anticipate or ‘type’ Augustine’s eventual *con*version, the decisive turn in the right direction.<sup>224</sup>

Derrida imitates this structure, littering the text with ‘false turns’ and declaring his intention to “re-remember myself around a single event... the circumcision of me, the unique one” (59-60) and to “wait for the moment which is looking for me” (282). The text suggests various events which may prove key or conversional, for example, the writer’s facial paralysis or the mother’s illness or death. John D. Caputo even argues, as we have seen, that ‘Circumfession’ is ‘the surprising story of Derrida’s conversion from these secular texts and languages to a certain Hebrew, to his life of faith and passion, of prayers and tears’.

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<sup>222</sup> Michael Stanislawski offers an interesting and informative discussion of Jewish autobiography, asserting that “as far as we know, the genre of autobiography seems to have remained basically foreign to Jews throughout the centuries,” Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-fashioning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>223</sup> Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, *Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>224</sup> Jill Robbins, ‘Circumcising Confession: Derrida, Autobiography, Judaism’, *Diacritics*, 25.4 (Winter 1995), 20-38 (p. 25-6).

However, Caputo's reading again seems one-dimensional, reducing the various movements at work in the text to a transparent religious turn. Rather, the reader, anticipating a conversional turn to anchor and illuminate the text, is disappointed. In fact, Derrida manipulates this expectation, frequently presenting shifts and turns without endorsing any one as a principally significant 'master event'. This effectively demonstrates the contingency of Augustine's 'conversional turn', and the arbitrariness of its adoption as pivotal moment. The writer's cynicism towards this 'turn' is underscored by his sarcastic reference to "SA sinning the more securely after conversion" (101).

However, 'Circumfession' is not a straightforward parody of confession, its declared aim, to 're-remember myself around a single event', simply a lie. Rather, Derrida's writing allows the contradictory elements of the confessional mode to emerge, depicting both the confessional economy and its relationship to that which exceeds it. Similarly, considering "the duel" (26) between his text and Bennington's, Derrida again depicts the non-dialectical relationship between the economic and the non-economic, with Bennington's program at once successful: "Geoff, who remains very close to God, for he knows everything about the 'logic' of what I might have written in the past, but also of what I might think or write in the future..." (16) yet also undermined by the singularity of the event, by "everything that all along this word vein lets or makes come the chance of events on which no program, no logical or textual machine will ever close" (15-16).

In demonstrating the contingency of Augustine's conversional turn, and in failing to endorse its own master turn or event, 'Circumfession' opens up the confessional structure to the demands of the other, acknowledging that "every responsibility is a conversion".<sup>225</sup> This suggests that conversion is an ongoing process rather than a single turn; thus, the writer aims "to repent, that is, to improve, to love, to transform my hatred into love, to transform myself, and to do so out of love".<sup>226</sup> This also accords with Lyotard's claim, in his own text on Augustine, that "The stroke of conversion is not one single blow delivered once and for all; it is not a shower of repeated blows either. No, confessional writing bears the fissure along with it".<sup>227</sup> Derrida's deconstruction of confession exposes this previously disavowed fissure and aims to rethink the entire genre through it.

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<sup>225</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Confessions and "Circumfession": A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida', in *Augustine and Postmodernism*, as before, pp. 28-49 (p. 46).

<sup>226</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Composing "Circumfession"', in *Augustine and Postmodernism*, as before, pp. 19-27 (p. 23).

<sup>227</sup> Lyotard, p. 49.

Diverging from the expected structure and teleology of the confessional narrative in rejecting a central 'turn', 'Circumfession' explores numerous turns, shifts, openings and narrative digressions. In this, its structure reflects the landscape of the mother's body, "an archipelago of red and blackish volcanoes, enflamed wounds, crusts and craters, signifiers like wells several centimeters deep, opening here, closing there, on her heels, her hips and sacrum, the very flesh exhibited in its inside, no more secret, no more skin" (82). Derrida's use of textual terminology to describe the body is part of the widespread contamination between text and body within the text. Whereas Augustine looks to detach the spiritual from the visceral, sidelining and objectifying the sinning, transgressive bodies, 'Circumfession' presents active if fragmented bodies which relate symbiotically to the text's structure. For Derrida, the body is inescapable; in 'Shibboleth (for Paul Celan)' he asks: "And how can one circumcise a name without touching upon the body?"<sup>228</sup> The body is mutable and non-identical, with no stable distinction between inside and outside, no distinction between the external sinning self which must be cast off, and a pure holy centre. Paralleling the changes to the mother's body, and undermining the notion of a self-same subject, the writer describes the physical transformation caused by his own facial paralysis. Change rather than sovereignty defines this subject, who, he asserts, suffers from "the illness of Proteus" (198). Again countering Augustine's rarefied spiritual narrative with viscosity, he explains: "my face has been disfigured by a facial paralysis holding my left eye fixed open like a glass-eyed Cyclops, imperturbable vigilance of the dead man, eyelid stretched by the vertical bar of an inner scar" (98). These external symptoms are inseparable from an internal change, as the writer describes: "I am no longer the same since the FP, whose signs seem to have been effaced though I know I'm not the same face, the same persona, I seem to have seen myself near to losing my face, incapable of looking in a mirror at the fright of truth, the dissymmetry of a life in caricature" (123). Although this experience is triggered by a singular event, it testifies to the instability of all subjectivity.

In endeavouring to disrupt Bennington's programmatic rendering of deconstruction, 'Circumfession' employs autobiography in order to guarantee singularity. However, the text itself dramatises the way in which singularity, in its very expression, cedes to the general. Even the unique autobiographical details are reduced to type, as Derrida situates his texts in "the 'writer and his mother' series, subseries 'the mother's death'" (36-7). Further, the imagery of doubling, dividing and multiplying which recurs in the text, not only

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<sup>228</sup> Derrida, 'Shibboleth (for Paul Celan)', pp. 1-64 (p. 54).

demonstrates the impossibility of a self-same subject but also the fragility of singularity.<sup>229</sup> Although the relationship between ‘Circumfession’ and Bennington’s systematization of deconstruction is depicted as a ‘duel’, the text as a whole complicates and investigates the relationship between the singular and the general beyond simple opposition. As Derrida elsewhere assesses the possibility of thinking the event and the machine together, he responds: “For that, it would be necessary in the future (but there will be no future except on this condition) to think both the event and the machine as two compatible or even indissociable concepts. Today they appear to us to be antinomic”.<sup>230</sup> The aim of the deconstructive ‘project’ is no less than to rethink and rewrite these apparent antitheses in order to forge a new political and ethical future. Such deconstructive rewriting consists in a painstaking adherence to the double reading. In ‘Circumfession’ this is instantiated in Derrida’s simultaneous confession and deconstruction of the confessional economy.

The confessional economy demands a reconciliatory conclusion to the subject’s narrative. Although ‘Circumfession’ contends that this economy is both contrived and closed to that which it claims to celebrate, it anticipates the completion of the economy and the closure of the text in various ways. Perhaps most importantly, it looks towards the necessary “absolution at the end of a confession” (88), with the writer awaiting “the great pardon that has not yet happened in my life, indeed I am waiting for it as absolute unicity, basically the only event from now on” (55-6). Other narrative elements which require resolution include the mother’s illness and, following the *Confessions*, her expected death, with the writer revealing: “I am no longer far from touching land at last, she is watching, she is waiting for me to have finished, she is waiting for me to go out, we will leave together...” (271). Throughout the text, the writer is preoccupied with kenosis, apocalypse and eschatology, considering himself the “last of the Jews” (190) and “the last of the eschatologists” (75). This leads the reader to expect a dramatic, apocalyptic ending, or the text’s own annihilation as the writer’s discourses “grind up everything including the mute ash whose name alone one then retains, scarcely mine, all that turning around nothing” (273). None of these expected resolutions of the narrative simply arrive, and in this, Derrida separates the deconstructive event or ‘to-come’ from the predictable salvific or redemptive eschatologies of Judaism or

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<sup>229</sup> See for example, the writer’s urge “to multiply the scenes” (p. 43).

<sup>230</sup> Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 72.



Christianity. Similarly, in 'Schibboleth (for Paul Celan)', he informs us that "The absolute to-come can only announce itself in the form of monstrosity..."<sup>231</sup>

The expectation of absolution, reconciliation, or even, following the writer's self-presentation as sacrificial victim, resurrection, is not simply fulfilled or undermined but, through the double-movement, simultaneously fulfilled and destabilized. The text therefore, finds itself "between two resurrections" (54), one redemptive, and the other, merely "the simulacrum of a resurrection" (313). In the absence of a transcendent God, the writer cannot disclose "the name from which I expect resurrection" (303). Further, the references to apocalypse and holocaust serve to associate completion with stabilisation and even violence. Consequently, the text sustains this unresolved tension between completion or stabilisation, and infinite movement or difference, to the very end. As the writer describes: "you see yourself beginning to overrun this discourse on castration... resurrection will be for you *"more than ever the address, the stabilized realisation of a destination... not to be finished with a destinerrancy that was never my doing..."* (313-4) The doubling of these two incompatible movements, stabilisation and destinerrancy, and the impossibility of reducing them to the same provides the final thought of the text, as the writer closes: "...you the floating toy at high tide and under the moon, you the crossing between these two phantoms of witnesses who will never come down to the same" (315).

An additional challenge to the closure of the confessional economy is provided by the writer's ambivalent assumption of culpability and sin. Demonstrating the way in which the confessional text values a rigid structure and economy more highly than justice, that "avowal, even for a crime not committed, simply secretes meaning and order" (296), the writer both accepts and questions the insistence that he must allow himself to "*be charged*" (301). This stage is necessary, the writer "bending beneath the burden", in order to deliver "to the world the very discourse of this impregnable inedible simulacrum" (306), or rather, to bring the confession to fruition. This acceptance of culpability inscribes the writer within a sacrificial economy, as a Christ-like victim. He explains:

*you my pardoner, who knows there's nothing to pardon, and I am your absolved one, you need me as absolved, you would not love me if I were innocent or guilty, only innocent absolved of a fault which it seemed to me I had committed, before me, when it fell upon me like life itself, like death* (299)

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<sup>231</sup> Derrida, 'Schibboleth (for Paul Celan)', pp. 1-64 (p. 57).

Whilst assuming the necessary role, the writer also questions the assumption of the inherently sinful nature of humanity. Thus rather than simply accepting Augustine's pessimistic claim that "it is not we who sin, but some unknown nature within us which sins",<sup>232</sup> he contests his earlier adoption of the position of sinner, informing us: "Whether they expelled me from school or threw me into prison, I always thought the other must have good reason to accuse me" (300). Here we are reminded that confession and circumcision, as religious rituals of purity, are also political tools of exclusion. The issues of culpability, sin and persecution cause the writer to foreground the intersection between individual and collective histories, here invoking the complexities and horrors of Jewish histories, disclosing: "...the Jews know nothing of confession, to which I reply that I am not confessing myself, rather I'm confessing the others for the imponderable and therefore so heavy secrets that I inherit" (187).

The text's challenge to Augustine's acceptance of the narrative of original sin draws attention to Augustine's paradoxical relationship with writing. Derrida asserts that Augustine creates a literary confession, revealing a disjunction between the confessional economy which requires controlled and limited expression, and literature, the "institution of 'saying everything'" (210). The literary confession strives to "'make' truth in a style, a book and before witnesses" (47), overlooking the idea of a pre-existing God-given truth, or even the need for an external creator. In the literary work, the writer himself appears as omnipotent creator. In contrast, the confessional economy looks to access and represent an inaccessible and unrepresentable truth. Elsewhere, in *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida asserts: "Truth belongs to this movement of repayment that tries in vain to render itself adequate to its cause or to the thing".<sup>233</sup> In 'Circumfession', in a very different style, he describes the tension:

Commotion of writing, give in only to it, do not make oneself interesting by promised avowal or refused secret, so no literature if literature, the institution of 'saying everything' breathes to the hope of seeing the other confess and thereby you, yourself, confess *yourself*.. (210)

For Augustine, writing, as a divergence from objectivity and divine truth, or even as evidence of their impossibility, is itself sinful. Consequently, "one always asks for pardon

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<sup>232</sup> Augustine cited in Derrida, 'Circumfession', p. 219.

<sup>233</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and other ruins*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p. 30.

when one writes”, (46) implying that one may need to ask pardon for the very act of writing (“the simulacrum of avowal” (46)) as much as for the crime one has committed.<sup>234</sup> Following this assumption of the sinfulness of writing, Robert Smith emphasises the economical, even dialectical nature of religious confession, stressing: “Religious confessions seek the exchange of that diabolical other for a godly one, literature for scripture... Confession is a dialectics in so far as it posits the (negative) sin that will be negated by the positive goodness of confessing”.<sup>235</sup> This is a significant point of divergence between Augustine and Derrida, for whom, the possibilities of ‘writing’, and literature in particular, are not ‘diabolical’ but are ripe with ethical and political potential. As I shall examine in later chapters, literature is for Derrida, as Martin McQuillan acknowledges, “a space in which the impossibility of the democracy-to-come might be possible”.<sup>236</sup> Despite this divergence, and the tension between the religious and literary models of confession, Derrida suggests that both imply the emergence of the subject and the calling into singularity. He explains that the “*essential* truth of avowal” consists of “a request... asked of religion as of literature, before the one and the other which have a right only to this time, for pardoning, for pardon, for nothing” (48-9).

In its ambivalence to completion and absolution, ‘Circumfession’ plays out the dialogical, double movement of deconstruction. A similar movement can also be perceived in the relationship between ‘Circumfession’ and Bennington’s text ‘Derridabase’. The seeming antagonism between the texts gives way to a mutual dependence. Not only does this relationship resemble the interaction between the economic and non-economic as illustrated by the movements of *différance*<sup>237</sup> the ‘law’ of ‘Derridabase’ as that “which presides over everything that can happen to me [Derrida] through writing” (32)- the texts also contaminate each other, with this ‘law’ internalised in ‘Circumfession’ as the mother, “the eternal survivress, to the theologic program or maternal figure of absolute knowledge” (46). Equally, in Bennington’s text, the economy of deconstruction is disrupted not just from the outside, but from the inside, as it cannot escape “the ruin it will always have walled up inside it” (4-6). Whereas the confessional economy is defined by closure, completion and self-identity, Derrida demonstrates a symbiosis between economy and

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<sup>234</sup> This parallels Dennis Foster’s claim that “When Ricoeur speaks of the confessional re-creation of a transgressive act as sin, he identifies the original act with writing”. Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 15.

<sup>235</sup> Robert Smith, p. 47.

<sup>236</sup> Martin McQuillan, ‘What is called literature’, in Derrida, *Geneses*, as before, pp. v-xv (p. vi).

<sup>237</sup> See further discussion of this in Chapter Two.

interruption; every matrix, he argues, “remains by essence, by force, nonsaturable, nonsuturable, invulnerable, therefore only extensible and transformable, always unfinished” (34).

### **(ii) The Confessional Subject**

Just as Derrida’s deconstruction of the confessional economy exposes the contrived structure of the confessional narrative, it also reveals the fiction of the subject’s self-identity. The didactic power of the confessional narrative depends on a convincing union between written and writing selves. As Jill Robbins describes, the narrative achieves its unity “at the moment of conversion, its own constitution, when sinner and narrator coincide”, which would collapse the double perspective into a single voice.<sup>238</sup> This suppression of difference in order to produce a single voice and identity is however, contrived, and, in the absence of complete authorial control, this single voice is haunted by other voices, identities and selves. This corresponds with Lyotard’s description of the never-ending confessional process. He explains that the “Subject of the confessional work, the first person author forgets that he is the work of writing. He is the work of time: he is waiting for himself to arrive, he is catching himself up...”<sup>239</sup> According to James O’Rourke, these two subjects are irreconcilable as “The principle of indeterminacy in the confessional autobiography rests on the impossibility of reconciling these two narratives”.<sup>240</sup> ‘Circumfession’ dramatises both this desire for self-identity, closure and completion and concurs with O’Rourke’s assessment of its impossibility. Again interchanging physical and textual imagery, the writer describes this lack of closure as “the skin which does not want finally to close on its silence” (295).

Derrida illustrates how the desire for a controlled confessional narrative and that for a linear and self-affirming account of the confessional subject are connected by the notion of a conversional turn which directs the progress of both narrative and protagonist. Such an event is anticipated in ‘Circumfession’ as the writer aims “to re-remember myself around a single event” (59) and waits “for the moment which is looking for me” (282) however its fulfilment is deferred, denying the economic recuperation which would resolve both narrative ambiguity and subjective transgression. Unlike Augustine’s text, which presents the conversional turn as an inexorable combination of divine predestination and human free

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<sup>238</sup> Robbins, 20-38 (p. 26).

<sup>239</sup> Lyotard, p. 36.

<sup>240</sup> James O’ Rourke, *Sex, Lies and Autobiography: The Ethics of Confession* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 2.

will, no external event or omnipotent narrator controls the course of 'Circumfession'. Instead of contriving the unity of identity, Derrida aims to write a 'free' confession with an uninhibited writer, a "confession... from the unconscious" (233). The free flowing of discourse is illustrated by images of expression and release: "the superabundance of a flood" (4) and the recurrent motif of bloodletting, as Derrida observes: "The continuous flow of blood, absolute, absolved in the sense that nothing seemed to come between the source and the mouth" (7). However, this unmediated movement is immediately disrupted by a "brutal intervention of the other" (7) be it through "another vein" or "another language" (4). Derrida uses the term "aspirating" (8), signifying both the flow (of breath or blood) and its interruption to demonstrate that these are integral parts of the same gesture. The confessional discourse is inherently self-interrupting.

Despite the chronological succession implied by the 59 sections, each section presents a new, non-progressive attempt to find the right vein or discourse to confess or locate the self; the writer describes: "ever, since, seeking a sentence, I have been seeking myself in a sentence" (13). The pun again suggests that to be a subject means to be subjected, and further, that such subjection is linguistic: language is always restrictive- it 'sentences'- and exorbitant, it exceeds and outlasts the subject. The division of the self is also manifested in other ways. Speaking of confession, the writer describes "a sort of compulsion to overtake each second, like one car overtaking another, doubling it rather, overprinting it with the negative of a photograph already taken with a 'delay' mechanism" (39). Many more uses of doubling, splitting or multiplication persist throughout the text, for example, the variety of addressees, the division of the signature, and "*the whole thematics of the twin*" (138).

'Circumfession' challenges the supposition that the subject is a discrete, self-contained, and in some way consistent, entity which interacts with a detached exterior. Again utilising the imagery of blood, Derrida adopts Augustine's notion of the exteriorized interior, his perception of the vial of his own blood as "the image of my own life exhibiting itself outside" (10) represents the process of confession itself, violent and invasive and productive of a simulacra of the inside, which develops an almost sinister life of its own: "the inside gives itself up and you can do what you like with it, it's me but I'm no longer there" (12). Writing undermines the idea of an unchanging kernel of selfhood by revealing the process of subjective formation and generating numerous incompatible selves and identities. Here, the lack of consistent narrative voice or subjective centre is also glossed as kenosis. The writer reveals:

I am trying to disinterest myself from myself to withdraw from death by making the 'I', to whom death is supposed to happen, gradually go away, no, be destroyed before death comes to meet it, so that at the end already there should be no one left to be scared of losing the world in losing himself in it (190)

This recalls the tension in the *Confessions* between Augustine's construction of a literary identity and his insistence on the rejection of the ego as the path to God. Further, whereas Derrida looks to demonstrate that fragmentation is the condition of selfhood and the unified self a fiction, Augustine reinforces the association of a unified self with purity and holiness. Describing his earlier self, he claims that "my own impiety had divided me against myself" (219), in contrast to conversion which is presented as a return to the self. Succumbing at times to deviation, Augustine's text illustrates the paradox of the Christian vision, which, as Jonathan Dollimore describes, claims "that man is created desiring that which is forbidden", and, "that perversion originates in that which it subverts, in this case, the divine order".<sup>241</sup> Despite this, Augustine reinforces the confessional trajectory towards a conclusive unity between writing and written selves, redeeming the sinner, closing the hermeneutic circle and eliminating deviant excess. Again, it is evident that whereas Augustine perceives writing as potentially sinful, for Derrida it is the source of new possibilities. 'Circumfession' expresses the desire to "invent a new language, (through simplicity rediscovered), another fluid, a new SENTENCE" (115), mirroring the "post-writing"<sup>242</sup> to which Derrida aspires in 'Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)', and reiterating the significance of writing for Derrida, a significance disavowed by Hägglund and Caputo. Here, in 'Circumfession', this 'new language' requires reformulations of both the subject and God.

Part of the need for a 'new language' or "syntax to be invented" (128) is generated by the current use of language (like circumcision) to exclude and divide. In contrast, 'Circumfession', as "*the interrupted autobiothanatoheterographical opus*" (213) always looks to the other and to difference, reinscribing the aneconomic alongside the economic.<sup>243</sup> This call for a 'new language' demands that we rethink the relationship between writing and the external events which it records. This is exemplified by the writer's account of his mother's deteriorating health, which challenges the reader's assumptions about the confessional

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<sup>241</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 130.

<sup>242</sup> Derrida, 'Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)', pp. 35-85 (p. 53).

<sup>243</sup> However, this interruptive gesture is always accompanied by the desire to restore economy, here "a writing without interruption that has been looking for itself forever, looking for me across the cut" (p. 201).

subject and the inscription of the exterior. The writer explicitly opposes external events to language, with the text “a race against time between writing and her [his mother’s] life” (165). The writer defers all power to the exterior:

...knowing in advance the nonknowledge into which the imminent but unpredictable coming of an event, the death of my mother, Sultana Esther Georgette Safar Derrida, would come to sculpt the writing from the outside, give it its form and its rhythm from an incalculable interruption, never will any of my texts have depended in its most essential inside on such a cutting, accidental and contingent outside, as though each syllable and the very milieu of each periphrasis were preparing itself to receive a telephone call, the news of the death of one dying (206-7)

This deferral is disingenuous as the writer controls our access to and experience of external events, as well as the accuracy of their representation. In foregrounding the figure of the mother, the writer highlights the permeable and shifting boundary of the text. The mother also embodies the ‘other’, countering the sameness and purity of patriarchal religiosity; as David Farrell Krell expounds: “‘Circumfession’ thus revolves about the mother as other, the m(other) who speaks as the mouth of God, the (m)other as the immortal one who is nonetheless dying, the surviving (m)other of the writer who is driven to confess-circuitously”.<sup>244</sup> The reader is led to anticipate the mother’s death as both the completion of her transformation and mythologization, and the fulfilment of the narrative and its relationship to the *Confessions*. However, like many gestures towards textual completion, this one is thwarted, and the final reference to the mother is open-ended:

Tuesday, May 1, 1990, 7 o’clock in the morning in Laguna Beach, she’s still alive for you, over there in Nice, 20, Parmentier, 4<sup>th</sup> floor... you will see her, perhaps you will still hear her when you get back, it’s enough to recount the ‘present’ to throw G’s theologic program off course... (311)

Additionally, towards the end of the text, the identities of mother and writer begin to blur. “Nobody will ever know what is happening between us” (286), the writer maintains, and it is no longer clear whether the long-expected death is “hers or mine” (292). This symbiosis seems to echo the relationship between life and writing; neither can be reduced to clear causal connections. Further, the writer’s claim that “my [his] mother’s metaphasic chaos is becoming my [his] sentence” (193), punning on the meanings of metaphasia and aphasia, again recalls the contamination between text and body, emphasising the generation of new

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<sup>244</sup> Krell, p. 193.

ways of reading and writing. This is evidenced in his re-reading of the *Confessions*, “I like to read right on the skin of his language” (241) he declares. By blurring both mother and son, and narrative interior and exterior, Derrida, contra Augustine, claims that the “double perspective” of the “conversion narrative” can never be wholly collapsed into a single voice, perspective or subject.<sup>245</sup> Yet the writing self too is subject to the work of writing, and the writer, an impossible figure of chance or singularity contrasting with the ‘geologic program’ of ‘Derridabase’, is himself, both inside and outside the text. He reveals:

...everything I venerate, not the unpredictable event I have supposedly written, myself, namely sentences fit to crack open the geologic program, no, that took place outside the writing that you’re reading, in my body if you prefer, this conversion ought to be the surprise of an event happening to ‘myself’ who am therefore no longer myself... but the fact that it is not decipherable here on the page does not signify any way the illegibility of the said ‘conversion’ (124-5)

This ‘self’, be it external or internal to the text, becomes the only chance of a singularity which will thwart the program, although this too is in danger of being totalised and therefore, destroyed. Here, chance itself is at risk of deification, of being instated as yet another ordering principle, demonstrating the inescapable relation between economy and excess which Derrida charts. This however, reinforces the decentralised nature of the deconstructive confession, reminding us that stability cannot be sought either from within the subject or from an overarching principle or transcendent God.

### (iii) The God of Confession

Such a God, and indeed other traditional theological and philosophical models of the divine are rejected by the Derrida of *The Gift of Death* as “idoltrous stereotyping”.<sup>246</sup> This position is strengthened in ‘Circumfession’, with the text insisting that any understanding of God must be ascertained within and through the text as God can no longer be perceived as a fixed external reference point. Linking ‘Circumfession’ and Lyotard’s own account of the *Confessions*, Geoffrey Bennington argues that “In both Derrida and Lyotard, then, the event of confession (as writing and as reading) makes something happen to the extent that it disrupts just the kind of positive infinity that we often call ‘God’”.<sup>247</sup> For both thinkers, this destabilization of the concept of God originates from the tensions in Augustine’s own text.

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<sup>245</sup> Robbins, 20-38 (p. 26).

<sup>246</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 108.

<sup>247</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Time- for the Truth’, in *Augustine and Postmodernism*, as before, pp. 53-67 (p. 65).



Lyotard suggests that Augustine uses the name God simply “because that is the custom of the day”.<sup>248</sup> Derrida goes further, tracing the linguistic emphasis of his own account of God to Augustine himself, who, he argues, wanted “to bring it about that in *arriving* at God, something should happen to God, and *someone* happen to him who would transform the science of God into a learned ignorance, he says he has to do so in *writing*” (18). Instead of positing a God who is external and unchangeable, and thus irrelevant, Derrida sees Augustine’s text as transgressing the strict confessional economy through an ambivalent openness to the coming of God, an openness which he endeavours to follow and develop in ‘Circumfession’.

The constitutive ‘fissure’ of confession, evident both in the nonsuturability of the confessional economy and in the non-identity of the confessional subject can also be traced to the non-identity, or even absence, of the God which confession presupposes. Dennis Foster describes:

Confession represses a knowledge of the inescapability of convention. That is, each narrator acts from within certain conventions of class, love, family and fatherhood that must be seen as having natural authority in order for him to continue acting... But that founding father was never there...<sup>249</sup>

The concealed economies which sustain the confessional are dependent on the existence of an external God, whose absence haunts ‘Circumfession’, an absence reflected by the lack of father figures within the text. Whereas the mother is foregrounded throughout, the influence of the father is experienced indirectly through the traditions and language of patriarchy. This lack leads David Farrell Krell to observe the “relative absence of the father from the text”,<sup>250</sup> and Gideon Ofrat to suggest that “Derrida’s overall philosophy thus emerges as an impossible encounter with the absence, or murder, of the father”.<sup>251</sup> This is perhaps overly reductive, yet this absence is significant for ‘Circumfession’. The lack of a father signifies the absence of the proper or the purely familial, undermining any definitive origin and thus assuring the “chance or arbitrariness of the starting point” (50). Further, the idea of an omnipotent God is parodied by the relationship to ‘Derridabase’, “the theologic program elaborated by Geoff, who remains very close to God, for he knows everything about the ‘logic’ of what I might have written in the past, but also of what I might think or

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<sup>248</sup> Lyotard, p. 36.

<sup>249</sup> Foster, p. 78.

<sup>250</sup> Krell, p. 193.

<sup>251</sup> Ofrat, p. 104.

write in the future..." (16). It is therefore unsurprising that 'Circumfession' contains Derrida's most explicit declaration of atheism. He asserts:

the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of a voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything, nor a transcendent law or an immanent *schechina*, that feminine figure of a Yahweh who remains so strange and so familiar to me, but the secret I am excluded from... (155)

Derrida's 'atheism' rejects current conceptions of God in favour of another which defies fixed definition. Such a God would not be a 'given', or object to be encountered, rather would be that which is continuously generated and discovered by the deconstructive process. Derrida describes:

*when he says 'you' in the singular and they all wonder, who is he invoking thus... it's you this god hidden in more than one, capable each time of receiving my prayer, you are my prayer's destiny, you know everything before me, you are the god (of my) unconscious, we all but never miss each other, you are the measure they don't know how to take and that's why they wonder whom, from the depth of my solitude, I still address, you are a mortal god, that's why I write, I write you my god" (9-4-81), to save you from your own immortality (263-4)*

In these familiar yet intimate gestures, Derrida associates God with activity, performativity, change and the act of writing. The name signifies an excess which surpasses the 'measure' of the confessional economy. God is repeatedly linked with textuality: he "must turn around his own unknown grammar" (287) and he is "weeping in me, turning around me, reappropriating my languages" (224), and with mortality and limitation: there is "a Nothing in which God reminds me of him" (273) and the writer refers to "the violence of the void through which God goes to earth to death in me" (272). These active, even violent images contrast with the contrivance of performativity adopted within the traditional confessional economy, a contrivance which aims to disguise the irrelevance of God and the fixed trajectory of the writer. It is this boldness which leads John D. Caputo to claim that "Derrida's 'Circumfession' is more radically confessional than Augustine's *Confessions*, his word more wounded," a claim which is borne out by the text.<sup>252</sup> In rejecting artificial performativity with a predetermined end, Derrida looks to rediscover the meaning of 'God',

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<sup>252</sup> John D. Caputo, 'Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Confession of Prayer', in *Augustine and Postmodernism*, pp. 95-114 (p. 103).

and to enable the confessional process, a process through which the identities of both writer and addressee are detabilised. At the start, the writer asserts:

I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and *God*, and *take*, take God, and not only do I pray, and pray to him, but I take him here and take him as my witness, I give myself what he gives me... (56-8)

Derrida assumes God as paradigmatic witness and “the name of this absolutely unknown indeterminate addressee”,<sup>253</sup> who is not a God of ‘constancy’ and ‘positive infinity’, but who emerges unclearly, associated with language, excess, contradiction and contamination. By suspending certain confessional economies and enabling a new way of writing, ‘Circumfession’ looks to discover what ‘God’ and the ‘subject’ might mean. These do not become plainly and self-identically present as the confessional economies suggest, but are both dynamic, and bound in an impossible relationship created by their dependence on the figure of the other, as, “one always confesses the other” (147). The significance of this ‘other’, so embedded in the ethical, political and religious preoccupations of Derrida’s later work, is decisive yet not self-evident, influencing Derrida’s understanding of both God and the subject. Next I shall turn to Derrida’s text ‘Envois’, which again reasserts Derrida’s ‘double reading’ of confession, whilst beginning to address the political implications of the confessional mode.

### 3. Reading ‘Envois’

#### (a) “Private or public correspondences”<sup>254</sup>

‘Envois’, a “satire of epistolary literature... stuffed with addresses, postal codes, crypted missives, anonymous letters, all of it confided to so many modes, genres, and tones”<sup>255</sup> is ostensibly “the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence”,<sup>256</sup> intimate love letters which have been made available for public view. Although, unlike ‘Circumfession’, ‘Envois’ is not primarily a confessional text, confession is one of its ‘many modes’, and like

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<sup>253</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Confessions and “Circumfession”’: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida’, pp. 28-49 (p. 35).

<sup>254</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 1-256 (p. 62).

<sup>255</sup> Derrida, *The Post Card*, back cover.

<sup>256</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 3).

'Circumfession', it challenges the sureties of the confessional economy. Here, I shall first demonstrate how, in its interaction with the confessional, 'Envois' reinforces Derrida's rewriting, and secondly, responding to its explicitly politicised presentation of confession, and its aim of "effacing the public/private opposition",<sup>257</sup> I shall consider some of the implications of Derrida's changing accounts of confession, religion and God.

'Envois' and 'Circumfession' share numerous concerns and preoccupations. Both texts explore the supplementary relationship between the proper and improper, and the subsequent necessity of contamination and illegitimacy,<sup>258</sup> both associate the body with the text,<sup>259</sup> employ imagery of division and doubling, and emphasise the instability of singularity. Moreover, both expose the fiction of self-identity, revealing the plurality of identity as denied by the singularity of the name, which nevertheless signifies as any common noun.<sup>260</sup> Other similarities include a preoccupation with apocalypse, eschatology and holocaust, incorporating a desire to write "while erasing all the traits",<sup>261</sup> a blurring of the boundary between interior and exterior, a declaration that the text is written according to a "contract",<sup>262</sup> and an investigation of the relationship between the programmatic<sup>263</sup> or technological, and singularity, the event, and the possibility of chance. 'Envois' illustrates the pervasiveness of the confessional mode by showing how it resonates within this apparently secular text. One expression of this is the connection between the 'conversional turn', as explored and subverted in 'Circumfession', and the trope of turning back, turning around, or turning one's back in 'Envois'.

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<sup>257</sup> Gregory Ulmer, 'The Post-Age', *Diacritics*, 11 (Autumn 1981), 39-56 (p. 46).

<sup>258</sup> See, for example, the claim: "I who am the purest of bastards leaving bastards of every kind almost everywhere", Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 84).

<sup>259</sup> Examples of this include "I address myself in the way one arches oneself" (p. 58), and "This is my body" (p. 99). Quotations from Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256.

<sup>260</sup> Instances of the multiple significance of the name and naming include Derrida's assertion that "If I name me, myself, it's only in order to add to the confusion" (p. 185), the familiar tracing of the name back to the name of God: "YHWH simultaneously demands and forbids, in his deconstructive gesture, that one understand his proper name within language, he mandates and crosses out the translation, he dooms us to necessary and impossible translation" (p. 165), and the failure of the name as a symbol of propriety and self-identity: "I regret that you [*tu*] do not very much trust my signature, on the pretext that we might be several" (p. 6). All quotations from Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256.

<sup>261</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', p. 11. Glossing this, Gideon Ofrat writes: "Preserving the vitality of truth is thus setting it on fire, safeguarding it in the dual condition of revelation and perdition", Ofrat, p. 98. See also Robert Smith's contrasting claim that "Derrida's is the attempt, 'against desire', to save remains from the totalising holocaust of reason which would consume all genealogy into itself, the proper comprehended as proper, the improper as improper", Robert Smith, p. 40.

<sup>262</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 4).

<sup>263</sup> The speaker suggests that the position of absences within the text may be calculated using a program but "this program is in question throughout this work", 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 5).

Identified by Gregory Ulmer as the “master trope in ‘Envois,’”<sup>264</sup> turning back or turning one’s back is an interruptive gesture which, like the model of the postal system, demonstrates the way letters or meaning can “(sometimes) *fail to arrive*”.<sup>265</sup> “Before all else it is a question of turning one’s back [*dos*],”<sup>266</sup> the writer insists. The trope has multiple meanings, with Ulmer associating it with the Freudian *fort: da* and the Wolf Man, and the figures of apostrophe and antonomasia, and appearing in the text as “a pirouette,”<sup>267</sup> “reversibility,”<sup>268</sup> and as the “perverformative.”<sup>269</sup> It is also perceived as an interruption of economy, as Ulmer argues: “Derrida proposes instead an elaboration of enigmas rendering all conclusions problematic: truth gives way to secrets, closure to undecidability. In short, he proposes a writing oriented towards thought rather than information...”<sup>270</sup> This non-logocentric writing, akin to the ‘new language’ of ‘Circumfession’, is, I shall demonstrate, a crucial part of Derrida’s deconstructive re-visioning of ethics and politics, as well as essential to his conception of God. As in ‘Circumfession’, disruption of economy is always related to the restoration of connections and economies in a now-familiar double movement; even interruption, the possibility that “everything [will] derail”, follows “a rule”,<sup>271</sup> instating another economy.

In his predominantly psychoanalytic reading of ‘Envois’, Ulmer overlooks the significance of the ‘master trope’ of turning back or turning around to confession or religion, claiming that “The new autobiography has little to do with confession or expression”.<sup>272</sup> This trope, however, is part of the text’s secularization of the confessional, playing on the conversional ‘turn’ and the religious significance of the figures of *adieu* and apostrophe;<sup>273</sup> as Hent de Vries writes:

*To turn around religion also means here: to turn religion around.* All this is implied from the outset in the phrase *à Dieu* or *adieu*, in all its ambiguity of a movement toward God, toward the word or name of God, and a no less dramatic farewell to

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<sup>264</sup> Ulmer, 39-56 (p. 45).

<sup>265</sup> Ulmer, 39-56 (p. 42).

<sup>266</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 178).

<sup>267</sup> ‘Derrida, Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 15).

<sup>268</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 13).

<sup>269</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 136).

<sup>270</sup> Ulmer, 39-56 (p. 45).

<sup>271</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 177).

<sup>272</sup> Ulmer, 39-56 (p. 46).

<sup>273</sup> See also Derrida’s own discussion of the apostrophe: “A genre and a tone. The word-apostrophizes-speaks of the words addressed to the singular one, a live interpellation (the man of discourse or writing interrupts the continuous development of the sequence, abruptly turns toward someone, that is, something, addresses himself to you), but the word also speaks of the address to be detoured”, Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 4).

almost all the canonical, dogmatic or onto-theological interpretations of this very same 'God'.<sup>274</sup>

As de Vries suggests, Derrida's repeated use of such a trope indicates a changing relationship between God and the text, and even within Godself. In 'Envois', Derrida's missives, ostensibly addressed to a lover but unsecured in their destination, often resemble entries from 'Circumfession' to an absent, unknown or unknowable God. The writer discloses:

Your absence is reality for me, I don't know any other. This is when I know that you are not there, that you are away from me, have gone away from me, are going to go away from me. This is my reality principle, the most external necessity, all my impotence. You mark for me both reality and death; absent or present moreover (you are always there, over there, in the course of going back and forth), all this amounts to the same, you mark *me*, you signify reality as death for me, you name them or show them with your finger. And I believe in you, I remain attached to you.<sup>275</sup>

Elements of 'Envois' are self-consciously confessional, yet, like 'Circumfession', which writes God, in order "to save you [God] from your own immortality" (264), 'Envois' repeatedly stresses the weaknesses and limitations of God. This God "cannot absolve himself"<sup>276</sup> and is "destined to violate himself, and this is his entire beauty, the sadness of his strength, the hopeless weakness of his all-powerfulness".<sup>277</sup> Yet, an omnipotent God rejected, the text seeks to retain a personal, confessional relationship with that which he addresses as "my God".<sup>278</sup> Echoing Augustine's *Confessions*, the writer asks: "and when I call you my love, my love, is it you I am calling or my love? You, my love, is it you I thereby name, is it to you that I address myself?"<sup>279</sup> suggesting that the identities of speaker and addressee are given by writing rather than pre-existing it, and in the assumed absence of an omnipotent God, transposing the confessional discourse into the interaction with an addressed lover, who too, is ultimately unknown and unknowable. The text posits itself as "uninterrupted prayer",<sup>280</sup> prayer as that which is always addressed to the other.

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<sup>274</sup> De Vries, p. 24.

<sup>275</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 181-2).

<sup>276</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 171).

<sup>277</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 59). Other examples include: "they surpass our forces, and yourself, my God, could do nothing about it" (p. 127), and "unthinkable like the slightest failure of the Omnipresent One", (p. 116). Quotes from Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256.

<sup>278</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 198).

<sup>279</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 8).

<sup>280</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', front matter.

In the absence of a predetermined God and a predetermined self, 'Envois' undertakes a search for both the self who addresses and for an other to be addressed. Playing on the double meaning of *ton*, the writer reveals: "*Ton*, this for me is the name of God, my God, [*mon Dieu*] the one that I do not find".<sup>281</sup> Both senses of *ton* associate God with difference, and the narcissistic overtones of 'Envois', its self-referentiality and the closed circuit of its missives, begin to imply that God may be a function of the self or of discourse about the self and its own inescapable otherness. Challenging the distinction between public and private, 'Envois' comes to question what we understand as the limits of the political.

### **(b) The Political Implications of Confession**

As I have shown, the efficacy of confession depends upon a tightly controlled, yet unsustainable economy of form and subject. In practice, this can result in repression and subjection, consequences which have been thoroughly explored by Michel Foucault, who emphasizes the all-pervasiveness of the confessional mode:

the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have since become a singularly confessing society. The confession has since spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses- or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, is extracted from the body. Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied it like a shadow, and supported it when it could go no further: the dark twins. The most defenseless tenderness and the bloodiest of powers have a similar need of confession. Western man has become a confessing animal.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 114).

<sup>282</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 59. For an excellent assessment of Foucault's work in this area, as well as a genealogical analysis of confession itself see Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Other critics, following Foucault, have also considered the ways in which confession can be used as a tool of repression and domination. “Christian confession belongs with this new economy of the private self who must control and account for all expenditure”,<sup>283</sup> Jeremy Tambling notes, revealing how the confessional structure reinforces the model of an internalized subject who is answerable to an external authority. In assuming the existence of an intangible soul constituting this subject, religious confession denigrates the body, and is thus “the way in which the body is written upon, made subject to the demands of the reason which is committed to its eradication as something other”.<sup>284</sup> Further, although confession presents itself as freely given, John Caputo and Michael Scanlon claim that “to confess is the act, not of an autonomous author but of a subjected subject, an act not of autonomy but of giving up this autonomy”.<sup>285</sup> Such subjection extends to the confessors too, who, according to Tambling, are “‘interpellated’ (hailed, singled out by name), and are subjected, i.e. made to define themselves in a discourse given to them, and in which they must name and misname themselves...”<sup>286</sup>

However, the confessor, often a figure of authority such as priest or legal representative, may also become an instrument of institutional control. Stephen Haliczer asserts that “The priest’s power to grant or withhold absolution, to levy and control penance, and his superior education and social status made the confessional relationship inherently unequal”,<sup>287</sup> and similarly, Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner regard confession as “part of a moral-legal syndrome of practices and beliefs”<sup>288</sup> which can only be validated by “a person with authority to hear”.<sup>289</sup> Focusing on the constructed nature of confession, they argue that each one is “shot through with contradiction between spontaneity and compulsion, between disinterested confessions and confessions as part of ‘bargain justice’, between moral consensus and political force”.<sup>290</sup> Although differing in their structural

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<sup>283</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin and the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 24.

<sup>284</sup> Tambling, p. 29.

<sup>285</sup> ‘Introduction: The Postmodern Augustine’, by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon in *Augustine and Postmodernism*, pp. 1-15 (p. 4).

<sup>286</sup> Tambling, p. 2. See also Dennis Foster’s claim that “The writer’s work, in short, becomes the field on which the reader attempts to realise himself”. Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>287</sup> Stephen Haliczer, *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>288</sup> Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, *Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>289</sup> Hepworth and Turner, p. 6.

<sup>290</sup> Hepworth and Turner, p. 15.



apparatus, all modes of confession entail a certain “socializing of the interior processes”<sup>291</sup> and lead us to question assumptions about subjectivity, the relationship between interior and exterior and the ubiquity of the political.

‘Envois’ recognises that the strict confessional economy can be repressive and authoritarian. In the text, the word confession names a rigid, threatening and violent economy which blurs the boundary between legal and religious confessions. Confession is inescapably institutional, thus reinforcing Tambling’s claim that “This belief in Law is at the heart of confession, police or church”.<sup>292</sup> The contrived intimacy of ‘Envois’, written as if to a lover, mirrors that of the written religious confession. Once transposed into this intimate correspondence, the fixed, external tenets of law (and similarly, of philosophical or theological ‘truth’) become absurd yet retain their power. Consequently, confession, rather than being freely offered, is always extorted under physical or mental pressure, as the writer discloses:

The truth, it is in its cursed name that we have lost each other, in its name only, not for the truth itself, if there were any, but for the desire for truth which has extorted the most terrifying ‘confessions’ from us, after which we were more distant from ourselves than ever... All these secrets are false secrets, they merit only forgetting, and not at all confession. Nothing of this concerns us. After those miserable confessions that we have extorted from each other (extorted in appearance, but they could be only on the basis of a certain grasp offered by the one to the other, the compulsive urgency to confess under torture).<sup>293</sup>

The confessional process, whose addressee is typically a distant and unknowable God, is here enlivened by its situation between the two lovers. The process, consisting as Derrida describes, of a confession of sin followed by a profession of faith, focuses on the trauma of forced confessions, “this atrocious blackmail by true love”,<sup>294</sup> and the exhausted urge to “confess, let us confess”.<sup>295</sup> As in ‘Circumfession’, the demand for confession overwhelms the exigencies of justice, as “the situation is that of a confession without a crime”.<sup>296</sup> There is merely a nod towards expiation, the question “When will we pardon each other my love?” left hanging and evidence of a transcendent pardoner notably absent.<sup>297</sup> Even if absolution

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<sup>291</sup> Richard Valantasis, *Centuries of Holiness: Ancient Spirituality Refracted for a Postmodern Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 128.

<sup>292</sup> Tambling, p. 209.

<sup>293</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 82-3).

<sup>294</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 24).

<sup>295</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 30).

<sup>296</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 102).

<sup>297</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 115).

were possible, it would require the reduction of love to a simulacrum of the confessional process, as the writer describes: “(you know, when I say “I love you,” it is really a confession- perhaps in the sense of classical tragedy- at the same time as the sublime absolution of every possible crime)”.<sup>298</sup> That we are voyeurs of this most intimate of moments is highlighted ever more clearly, with the writer perceiving voyeurism everywhere, describing his desire to experience the “*corpus platonium*” as if it were “a very refined brothel, with confessionals and peepholes everywhere”<sup>299</sup> which not only draws attention to the link between sex and confession, it emphasises the trafficking of information within the text, the private made public, our own voyeuristic consumption of the writer’s correspondence, and the possible misinterpretation of these transactions.

The boundary between public and private, so crucial in the allocation of political rights and responsibilities, is challenged in ‘Envois’ through the figure of the postal system, and the adoption of confessional and autobiographical modes. In response to closed psychoanalytic economies and, in particular, to Lacan’s claim that the letter always reaches its destination, ‘Envois’ demonstrates the possible non-arrival of the letter, and the inevitable deviation of signification. As Derrida explains in a companion piece in *The Post Card*, “it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat... the circuit of the letter would not even have begun”, reinforcing the co-dependency of economy and excess.<sup>300</sup> Arrival necessitates a pre-determined addressee, and although it presents itself as a collection of love letters, private correspondence made public, ‘Envois’ emphasis on non-arrival and its use of the post card form, complicate the issue of addressing and the addressee, and our understanding of subjectivity.

Derrida’s aim, to “leave the gender or number” of the addressee “indeterminate”<sup>301</sup> in ‘Envois’ is thwarted, and the apparent addressee, a female lover, is herself generated by the text, a consequence, David Wills asserts, of “the demands of the French language” which requires “that a gender be chosen sooner or later”.<sup>302</sup> The text nonetheless reveals that “sender and addressee are artificial and structural categories”.<sup>303</sup> Indeed, for Derrida, the structure of the trace renders the singular addressee impossible, every “mark”, he declares,

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<sup>298</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 41).

<sup>299</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 129).

<sup>300</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘le facteur de la vérité’, in *The Post Card*, pp. 411-496 (p. 444).

<sup>301</sup> ‘Derrida’, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 144).

<sup>302</sup> David Wills, ‘Post/Card/Match/Book/“Envois”/Derrida’, *SubStance*, 13.2 (1984), 19-38 (p. 19).

<sup>303</sup> Wills, 19-38 (p. 38).

“divides itself, *it is valid several times in one time*: no more unique addressee”.<sup>304</sup> The ‘mark’ is therefore destined “to be remarked, precisely, to be repeated, and therefore divided, turned away from address that makes it into a post card that multiplies, to the point of a crowd, my addressee, female...”<sup>305</sup> These multiplied addressees include Derrida’s mother Esther, Socrates, God and, in a gesture which threatens to completely enclose the textual economy but instead demonstrates the heterogeneity of the self, the writer addresses himself.<sup>306</sup> The result is “too many, too many addresses, too much address”,<sup>307</sup> with the addressee, ultimately unknowable to the writer, and thus, “the absolute mystery”.<sup>308</sup> For Derrida, the impossibility of ensuring a ‘unique addressee’ and a closed, private discourse undermines the writer’s control over his words, whose meaning cannot be assured prior to their arrival with the addressee. Our relationships with others and with ourselves are mediated in this way, rendering private language impossible, and exposing discrete and pre-linguistic subjectivity as a fiction.

‘Envois’ emphasises the deviations of the postal system, with posting entailing “a halt, a relay, or a suspensive delay...”<sup>309</sup> and this underpins the trope of turning back or around, thus diverging from the expected linearity of both confessional and autobiographical narratives. The writer admits: “Would like to address myself, in a straight line, directly, without *courier*, only to you, but I do not arrive”.<sup>310</sup> The very structure of the post card obscures the distinctions between public and private, and inside and outside, with the writer insisting that “(the post card is neither private nor public)”.<sup>311</sup> David Wills expands on these ambiguities:

With a postcard one can never be sure what is most important, the image or the text; the legend, the message, or the address. In this sense it has no distinct outside, and it is usually turned inside out in order to be pinned to the wall. But on the other hand, more than other texts, it has neatly prescribed borders, limits to what it can contain. Similar paradoxes occur with respect to a postcard’s readability. Because it can be read by anyone, it adopts various devices and varying degrees of illegibility.

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<sup>304</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 192).

<sup>305</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 112).

<sup>306</sup> See, for example, the following: “What can this ciphered letter signify, my very sweet destiny, my immense, my very near unknown one? Perhaps this: even if it is still more mysterious, I owe it to you to have discovered homosexuality, and ours is indestructible. I owe you everything and I owe you nothing at all. We are of the same sex, and this is as true as two and two are four or that S is P. Q.E.D.” Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 53).

<sup>307</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 25).

<sup>308</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 205).

<sup>309</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 65).

<sup>310</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 23).

<sup>311</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 185).

It inevitably becomes the apology and the substitute, a sign of deferral, for the letter one never gets to write...<sup>312</sup>

And later:

The postcard, as frail rem(a)inder of both the support and the possible sub-version of the postal system, rejoins that series of differences already listed by Derrida—the tympan and the hymen (especially in *Glas*), here also the timbre-tone of voice become postage stamp. These are the tiny differences which dis-rupt the logic, the objections which subvert the system at the same time as they contribute to its constitution, and which are, for that reason, either appro-priated or excluded or both. But it is only through the notion of order, of priority become control, that the system is able to effect such an appropriation or exclu-sion.<sup>313</sup>

In Derrida's double reading however, this excess is both inside and outside the system, both recuperable and irrecoverable, the post card an inescapably liminal figure. In the same way, the opposition between public and private is challenged, yet also maintained and exploited. Of this distinction, Derrida writes: "you know that I do not believe in propriety, property, and above all not in the form that it takes according to the opposition public/private",<sup>314</sup> and he repeatedly demonstrates the impossibility of unmediated self-presence and of 'privacy'. Nevertheless, 'Envois' refers to "the desire to pose or to post myself in a kind of absolute privatization",<sup>315</sup> and the writer describes himself as "the *privé* [the private, the deprived one], more than anyone else henceforth".<sup>316</sup>

Throughout his work, Derrida has questioned the self-presence and self-identity of the subject, arguing that one's self experience is always mediated. This, the complexity of the self-relation, he terms 'auto-affection'.<sup>317</sup> Writing of auto-affection in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explains:

That which is written remains, and the experience of touching-touched admits the world as a third party. The exteriority of space is irreducible there... Auto-affection is a universal structure of experience. All living things are capable of auto-affection.

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<sup>312</sup> Wills, 19-38 (p. 24-5).

<sup>313</sup> Wills, 19-38 (p. 26-7).

<sup>314</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 185).

<sup>315</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 144).

<sup>316</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 144).

<sup>317</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the function of auto-affection in Derrida's reading of Husserl, see Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: the basic problem of phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

And only a being capable of symbolizing, that is to say, of auto-affecting, may let itself be affected by the other in general.<sup>318</sup>

Significantly, as well as applying beyond the human, and potentially, undermining its claims to uniqueness and superiority, auto-affection entails 'hetero affection', and the self is never discrete and sovereign, as Derrida discloses in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*:

If autopoosition, the *automonstrative autotely* of the 'I', even in the human, implies the 'I' to be an other that must welcome within itself some irreducible hetero-affection (as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere), then this autonomy of the 'I' would be neither pure or rigorous...<sup>319</sup>

That the self is always 'other' is emphasised in 'Circumfession' and 'Envois' through the constitution of identities through language. Derrida maintains that "The letter", in both senses, is "'interiorized'..."<sup>320</sup> thus corresponding to what he describes as "the law of a writing become your body: '*writing in (it)self*'".<sup>321</sup> This otherness of the self is underlined by the technological prostheses of memory employed by the speaker in 'Circumfession', who reveals: "since the computer I have my memory like a sky in front of me, all the succor, all the threats of a sky, the pelliculated simulacrum of another absolute subjectivity..."<sup>322</sup>

'Envois' and 'Circumfession' display both the impossibility of a self-contained subject, and the subsequent desires both for an absolute memory to instate and confirm one's subjectivity, and for absolute annihilation. The implications of this concept of subjectivity will emerge in later chapters as I consider its relationship both to Derrida's shifting understanding of God and to a more explicitly politicised notion of religion. Here, however, in 'Envois', Derrida's exploration of the remit of the political feels somehow incomplete. The text enacts the formation of the political, as that which develops between the tendency to disorder, impropriety and heteronomy- here the adestation of the letter and the otherness of the self- and reactionary responses to this awareness, the fearful enforcement of control and order in the form of repressive institutional structures, without however, illuminating the complex relationships between politics, ethics and religion.

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<sup>318</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, rev. edn (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 165.

<sup>319</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 95.

<sup>320</sup> Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256 (p. 195).

<sup>321</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?' in *Points*, pp. 288-299 (p. 293).

<sup>322</sup> Derrida, 'Circumfession', p. 228.

### (c) Conclusion

I began this chapter by demonstrating the insufficiency of current philosophical, literary and religious exegeses to account for the contamination of discourses in 'Circumfession'. In my own reading, it became clear that the genre of confession depends on strictly maintained economies and structures which conceal implicit contradictions. Derrida's examination of confession demonstrates that despite their attempts to remain pure or to purify, discourses, sacraments and institutions are inevitably contaminated. Examples of this which emerge in the text include the mutually dependent histories of Judaism and Christianity and the reliance of Augustine's primarily religious *Confessions* on literary techniques. This is reflected in the 'heterogeneous modes', of 'Circumfession', which were largely unrepresented by philosophical and theological accounts of the text, which still aimed to develop a linear and monolingual argument, the very thing that Derrida here problematises. It is the closed systematicity of unreflective philosophical and theological readings which Derrida challenges, observing in *A Taste for the Secret*, a constitutive paradox. Deconstruction, he contests, is:

not a method for discovering that which resists the system; it consists, rather, in remarking, in the reading and interpretation of texts, that what has made it possible to effect a system is nothing other than a certain dysfunction or 'disadjustment', a certain incapacity to close the system.<sup>323</sup>

Through the strategy of the 'double reading' both 'Envois' and 'Circumfession' focus on such a 'disadjustment', 'fissure', or 'wound', using it to rethink confession and to assess the limits certain discourses.<sup>324</sup> Philosophy, for example, is characterised by Derrida as the disavowal of such a wound,<sup>325</sup> a characteristic in which it is unlike deconstruction, as the latter, defined by Simon Critchley and Tim Mooney, proceeds from "the desire to keep open a dimension of alterity which can neither be reduced, comprehended, nor, strictly speaking,

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<sup>323</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>324</sup> References to the 'wound' include: "I am wounded, wounded to death." (p. 195), and "the same wound" (p. 122). Quotes from Derrida, 'Envois', pp. 1-256.

<sup>325</sup> "I think that it is very rare that this wound, if there is a wound, is readable in a philosophical text", Jacques Derrida, 'Passages', pp. 372-395 (p. 378-9).

even *thought* by philosophy”.<sup>326</sup> Similarly, ‘Envois’ reveals the way in which psychoanalysis disavows the constitutive fissure or wound.<sup>327</sup>

A second problem with the philosophical and theological readings I introduced was their underestimation of the functions of writing and the choice of mode. This too is connected to the constitutive gap or fissure which confession traditionally endeavours to close. Whereas the confessional narrative looks to conflate written and writing selves, this proves impossible, as Jeremy Tambling describes: “Confession itself opens the gap of which the grave is the symbol, between the desire to tell and the ability to make a completion...”<sup>328</sup> The infinitude of language thus denies the expected closure of the confessional narrative, necessitating a fresh understanding of life and living. Following deconstruction, Dennis Foster writes:

Life can move in only one direction, towards death, but the economy of the trace allows it to avoid the irreversible, unknowable investment in that end. Though it does not alter the end, and in fact depends on death to orient desire, the effect of life is to discover all possible alternative routes. The detour is the swerving from death that is the very activity of life and of language.<sup>329</sup>

Foster suggests that autobiographical or confessional writing exposes the fictions of linearity, closure and an oppositional relationship between life and death. The gap between the confessional economy and these excesses generates the double reading which drives Derrida’s account of confession in both ‘Circumfession’ and ‘Envois’, as textuality “threatens itself from two contradictory imminences”.<sup>330</sup> This doubleness is, for Derrida, inherent in confession, rendering confession a discourse which is responsive to the gestures of deconstruction. In a similar vein, Jeremy Tambling argues that “all dialogue, all

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<sup>326</sup> Simon Critchley and Timothy Mooney, ‘Deconstruction and Derrida’, in *Continental Philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Volume VIII*, ed. by Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 441-473 (p. 448). This exposes the misguided nature of Martin Hägglund’s aim to encapsulate ‘Circumfession’ with a solely philosophical reading.

<sup>327</sup> In ‘Envois’ and the following essays, Derrida challenges the psychoanalytic construction of a closed economy between analyst and analysand, the structuralist response to the symptom, and the logics of repression, the ‘death drive’ and the ‘work of mourning’. See Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 139-140), ‘Paralysis’ in *The Post Card*, pp. 338-386 (p. 356) and *The Work of Mourning*, trans. and ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 200. For a discussion of the relationships between writing, survival and mourning, see Judith Butler, ‘On Never Having Learned How to Live’ in *Differences: Derrida’s Gift*, 16.3 (2005), 27-34 (p. 30).

<sup>328</sup> Tambling, p. 36.

<sup>329</sup> Foster, p. 11. See also Derrida’s claim: “Identification is a difference to itself, a difference with/of itself. Thus *with*, *without* and *except* itself. The circle of the return to birth can only remain open, but this is at once a chance, a sign of life, and a wound. If it closed in on birth, on a plenitude of the utterance or the knowledge that says ‘I am born’ that would be death”, Jacques Derrida, ‘A “Madness” Must Watch Over Thinking’, in *Points*, pp. 339-364 (p. 340).

<sup>330</sup> Derrida, ‘Circumfession’, p. 51. See also the contention that the protagonist of ‘Envois’ writes whilst “folded in two with a double, bifid, perfidious, perjuring instrument”, Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 143).

interchange, which therefore suggests all forms of writing which expect to find an audience are confession, if not openly, then systematically, by virtue of their dialogic nature.”<sup>331</sup> For Derrida too, the movements of confessional discourse illuminate language more generally.

Derrida’s interest in the double or dialogical gestures of confession is also connected to his search for a new way of writing which is not controlled by hierarchy, logocentrism and homogeneity, but by the structure of the trace. This writing, here stimulated by Derrida’s liberation of the excesses of confessional writing from their restricted economies, haunts the system, and is enabled by specific tropes and images, for example the post card itself, as Derrida reveals: “when one sends oneself post cards (or the dialogues of Plato)”, Derrida explains, “in order to communicate on the subject of post cards, the collection becomes impossible, one can no longer totalize, one no longer encircles”.<sup>332</sup> This proposed writing, which, as Gregory Ulmer asserts, is “oriented towards thought rather than information...”<sup>333</sup> underpins ‘Envois’ and is named in an accompanying essay as an “athetic writing”.<sup>334</sup> Such a writing would challenge the theoretical grounding of repressive structures and institutions, and would enable Derrida to rethink both God and subjectivity, which, it becomes evident in these texts, should be rethought together, as dynamic, non-self-identical, open to otherness, and part of a broader understanding of ‘life’ itself.

In the following two chapters, I shall examine how Derrida engages with this new way of writing through the interrelated discourses of dialogue and silence, looking to discover what these discourses reveal about the changing concepts of God and subjectivity, their interrelation, and their ethical and political implications. Prior to that however, I shall turn to the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology, as the texts of negative theology directly influence Derrida’s writing on dialogue and silence.

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<sup>331</sup> Tambling, p. 206.

<sup>332</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, pp. 1-256 (p. 207).

<sup>333</sup> Ulmer, 39-56 (p. 45).

<sup>334</sup> Derrida, ‘Notices (Warnings)’ in *The Post Card*, as before, pp. 259-291 (p. 268).



## Excursus: Deconstruction and Negative Theology

Writing in 2000, J. P. Williams identified a “budding renaissance of apophatic theology”.<sup>1</sup> This resurgence of interest in apophatic or negative theology, a mode which demands “the denial of all descriptions and attributes as predicated of God”,<sup>2</sup> extends beyond theology, becoming, for William Franke, “a major topic in all the disciplines of the humanities”,<sup>3</sup> and providing a source of interest and exploration for Derrida’s own work. In the two central chapters of this thesis, ‘Dialogue’ and ‘Silence’, my examination of Derrida’s understanding of the concept of God will frequently engage with the questions and problems raised by negative theology. In this preliminary section, I shall briefly discuss what is understood by the term negative theology and begin to explore its relationship with, and implications for, deconstruction.

Negative theology is an inclusive term for beliefs, theories and practices which proceed from divine transcendence to the conclusion that every theological saying must also involve as unsaying. As Derrida himself explains in a “provisional hypothesis”, “negative theology consists in regarding every predicate, or even all predicative language, as inadequate to the essence, that is, to the hyperessentiality of God, and that, consequently, only a negative (‘apophatic’) attribution can claim to approach God”.<sup>4</sup> Sketching a skeletal history of negative theology at the opening of ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, Derrida asserts that “the unity of its archive is difficult to determine”,<sup>5</sup> thus problematising any treatment of negative theology as a ‘subject’. Raising yet bypassing some of the historical, sociological, philosophical, religious and psychological issues, here he approaches negative theology through its complex relationship with deconstruction.

Basically a bipartite text, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ consists of a consideration of this relationship alongside the familiar deconstructive concerns of secrecy, the promise and silence, followed by an historical reading of apophaticism through an

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<sup>1</sup> J. P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophysis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> William Franke, *On what Cannot be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature and the Arts. Volume 1: Classic Formulations*, ed. by William Franke (Notre Dame, IA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Franke, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, trans. by Ken Frieden and Elizabeth Rottenberg in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 143-195 (p. 144).

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 143).

analysis of three paradigms of ‘avoiding speaking’: Greek, Christian and Heideggerian. ‘Denials’ draws attention to the procedural similarities between the “textual practice”<sup>6</sup> of negative theology and deconstruction, referring to “the family resemblance of negative theology, in every discourse that seems to have recourse in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination”.<sup>7</sup> The two discourses are also similar in other respects: both are reflexive, performative,<sup>8</sup> and self-regulating,<sup>9</sup> both use the structure of the address, employ the form of the ‘without’ which “deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism”,<sup>10</sup> both rethink the function and meaning of negativity non-dialectically, and both relate to a promise which is presented as both historical and ahistorical. Both discourses are concerned with the status and function of prayer. Defining prayer as “the address asking the other- perhaps beyond request [*demande*] and gift- to give the promise of its presence as other”<sup>11</sup> and questioning the possibility of separating “the prayer, the quotation of prayer, and the address to the reader”,<sup>12</sup> Derrida presents his own text as inherently prayerful. However, like every performative address, prayer is necessarily “perverformative”,<sup>13</sup> and therefore subject to distortion and redirection.

Further links between the two discourses are suggested by Don Cupitt’s analysis of mysticism, negative theology and contemporary atheism.<sup>14</sup> Both deconstruction and negative theology are radical counter movements which challenge institutional norms;<sup>15</sup> Cupitt insists that “the mystic was compelled to deconstruct orthodoxy”,<sup>16</sup> describing how the immediacy of the mystical encounter disrupts the dogma of deferred union with God and undermines the Church’s assumption of unassailable authority. This is reinforced by Derrida’s own account of negative theology as a “subversive marginality”<sup>17</sup> which “launches

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 143).

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 144).

<sup>8</sup> Hent de Vries: “Religion is to be conceived of as the problem of performative utterance ‘as such’”, de Vries, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> See Nicholas Lash’s definition of negative theology as “the endless and endlessly demanding *disciplining* of language and imagination”, Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 148).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 177).

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 182).

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, ‘Envois’, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Although mysticism and negative theology are not synonymous, the two traditions overlap.

<sup>15</sup> Along these lines, William Franke argues that “apophatic reflection belongs particularly to periods of crisis, when confidence in established discourses crumbles, when the authoritative voice of orthodoxies and their official affirmations- and even affirmative, assertive discourse per se- begin to ring hollow”, Franke, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Don Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’, pp. 35-85 (p. 71).

or carries negativity as the principle of auto-destruction in the heart of each thesis”.<sup>18</sup> Further, negative theology and deconstruction both explore the relationship between language and event, with Cupitt claiming that “Language goes all the way down” and, consequently, that “the very composition of the poem was itself the mystical experience... *Writing* is redemption”.<sup>19</sup> Further, negative theology, like deconstruction, is “a second-order discourse”; neither discourse looks to make truth claims, but rather to examine the conditions and premises of such claims. Consequently, as J.P. Williams asserts, negative theology does not focus on “the divine subject, but the discourse which addresses the divine: it generates no statements about God, but statements about theological language.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, when approaching the issue of ‘God’, both discourses suspend the question of God’s existence, instead focusing on the nature and power of the discourse surrounding these questions, and what we can learn from them.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear from these instances that there are many, often methodological similarities between the two discourses, however, the precise nature of the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology requires further investigation. In the introduction to their recent collection *Apophatic Bodies*, Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller consider the implications of deconstruction for negative theology:

Deconstruction, for example, brings to the surface the hyperousiology, the Neoplatonic hierarchy, the ontotheology that leaves its traces even in the beyond-being. It ceaselessly searches out the radical limits of an epistemic certainty lodged somewhere near the top, under the cover of that luminous dark. Deconstruction, then, can be, and has been, interpreted theologically as a structural movement that performs the corrective service of saving the name of God from theology itself- a postmodern, non-appropriable apophatic gesture ridding us of God for the sake of God. However, it can be, and has been- earlier and more widely- interpreted as a structural movement that simply rids us of God, or rids us of notions of a God behind ‘God’, such that the sign ‘God’ can now be employed more appropriately and less toxically as a name we use for the structural conditions of possibility.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom’, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism*, p. 74. However, Cupitt overlooks Derrida’s fascination with negative theology, mistakenly regarding his engagement with religion as predominantly critical.

<sup>20</sup> J. P. Williams, p. 4

<sup>21</sup> See, for example Knut Alfsvåg’s claim that negative theology “results in a scepticism toward the epistemological cogency of human language which issues in a rejection of the possibility of proving the existence of God; what can be proved to exist through an argumentative strategy manifest in human language, is certainly not God”, Knut Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived: On the significance of Christological apophaticism* (Peeters: Leuven, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, ‘Introduction’, in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. by Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 1-21 (p. 8).

If the division between the two readings of Derrida is perhaps a little too clearly defined, Boesel and Keller's account nevertheless highlights both the significance of deconstruction for negative theology and vice versa, and the lack of critical consensus as to what this significance entails.

Identifying the similarities between the two discourses in the essay 'Différance', in which Derrida admits that "the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I [he] will often have to take recourse will resemble negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology",<sup>23</sup> he nevertheless denies that deconstruction is a form of negative theology. Yet these formal similarities persist, not least in Derrida's attempt to define deconstruction in his 1983 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', in which his approach recalls the gestures of negative theology; "Deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*... Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one... What deconstruction is not? everything of course! What is deconstruction? nothing of course!" he declares.<sup>24</sup> As I have shown, Derrida begins to explore the similarities between the two discourses at length in 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', first delivered in 1986, and in the later text 'Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)', first published in English in 1992.

Critical assessments of the relationship between the two discourses are diverse, however, it is clear that commentators tend to overlook the importance of Derrida's mode when assessing his writing on negative theology, an oversight I shall address in my own readings. Toby Foshay observes the differences in critical approaches, revealing that even those who seek to emphasise the similarities between negative theology and deconstruction do so with different aims. He describes:

The attempt of Derrida's critics to turn the analogy of negative theology and deconstruction into an equation and the family resemblance into a filiation is itself conducted from two opposing fronts. On the one hand, there are those who accuse Derrida of being a 'mere' negative theologian, simply negating and turning on its head the ontotheological tradition, and thus as contained within the dialectical play of the logocentricity which he purports to deconstruct. On the other hand are negative theologians themselves, such as Jean-Luc Marion, cited by Derrida, who challenge Derrida's analysis of the God of apophatic theology as a hyperessentiality,

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp. 1-27 (p. 6).

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', trans. by Andrew Benjamin and David Wood in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1-5 (p. 3-5).

which, as a 'beyond being', can only be grasped in its relation to classical cataphatic ontotheology.<sup>25</sup>

Derrida acknowledges that deconstruction "has been called...a type of negative theology",<sup>26</sup> yet this is inverted by thinkers including Graham Ward, Morny Joy and Kevin Hart who suggest that "negative theology is a form of deconstruction".<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Arthur Bradley contends that, "deconstruction is *not* a form of negative theology because negative theology is *already* in a state of deconstruction".<sup>28</sup> Bradley's argument is convincing, yet these attempts to determine which discourse is prior or pre-eminent seem to add little to our understanding of the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology. Similarly, looking to distance Derrida's work from scholars looking to incorporate it within Christian frameworks, Shira Wolosky asserts that "Derrida is resolute in distinguishing himself from the tradition of negative theology which he associates with a Greek heritage".<sup>29</sup> Rather, she insists that Derrida's work should be approached through a specifically Hebraic understanding of negative theology.

Derrida's dismissal of negative theology as ontotheological in his early work leads Kevin Hart to argue that "Derrida fails to recognise that negative theology has deconstructive power",<sup>30</sup> a claim which overlooks Derrida's demonstration of the contamination between negative theology and deconstruction in 'Sauf le nom', perhaps as a consequence of ignoring its dialogical mode. Hart's subsequent assertion that any similarity between the two discourses is structural rather than thematic reinforces the "problematic opposition between form and content" (49), a division which, as Derrida acknowledges, "negative theology will have powerfully contributed to calling into question" (49). A more challenging critique from within theology is enunciated by Denys Turner, who argues that by reducing negative theology to "such extremes of apophaticism" in order to evacuate it of any "hyperessentiality", Derrida changes, or misrepresents it. Turner observes: "this Derridean wholesale deconstruction of theological metaphysics, this concession to a

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<sup>25</sup> Toby Foshay, 'Introduction: Denegation and Resentment', in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 1-24 (p. 3).

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', pp. 1-5 (p. 3).

<sup>27</sup> Hart, *Trespass*, p. 186. Joy asserts: "rather than deconstruction being a form of negative theology, negative theology is itself a form of deconstruction". Morny Joy, 'Conclusion: Divine Reservations', in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 255-282 (p. 279).

<sup>28</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> 'Shira Wolosky, 'An "Other" Negative Theology: On Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials"', *Poetics Today*, 19.2 (Summer 1998), 261-280 (p. 263).

<sup>30</sup> Kevin Hart, *Trespass*, p. 198.

‘theology’ which *is* the ultimate agent deconstructive of metaphysical theism, is in fact unrecognisable in the mirror of medieval apophaticism...”<sup>31</sup> However, it is Arthur Bradley’s account of the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology which is most revealing. Bradley contends that “Derrida neither simply attacks nor defends negative theology but attempts- in an apparently paradoxical fashion that will again need to be defined carefully- to repeat it differently”.<sup>32</sup> For Bradley, Derrida reveals tensions in negative theology’s account of itself; its desire not to speak of the unspeakable is compromised by the “pre-originary ‘promise’ of language”,<sup>33</sup> which demonstrates that “negative theology is *itself* not simply negative theological all the way down”.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, negative theology maintains a certain openness to alterity within the logocentric discourses of theology. Bradley describes:

Negative theology becomes a privileged name for a linguistic force, excess or opening in the direction of the other traced in other contexts under the figure of the messianic (Caputo 1997) or the adieu (de Vries 1999) – that refuses to be locked within any particular theological or philosophical determination. Negative theology’s ambiguous status thus exceeds the distinctions between the Christian and the non-Christian, the theological and the secular, and the transcendental and the empirical.<sup>35</sup>

Two things are of particular significance here: first, that the questions raised by negative theology may provide a significant point of access to Derrida’s conceptions of, and relationships with, God and religion, and secondly that, in challenging perceptions about transcendence and empiricism, negative theology might have wider implications for our understanding of deconstruction. A key example of this would be the ethical and political significance of deconstruction. Rather than serving as a retreat from politics as Richard Beardsworth suggests,<sup>36</sup> negative theology would be, according to Bradley’s reading, a “privileged name for the relation to the other as absolutely other that constitutes the basis for all responsible thought and action”.<sup>37</sup> If negative theology’s identity is neither purely transcendental nor empirical but rather given “in the aporetic oscillation or ‘trembling’

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<sup>31</sup> Denys Turner, ‘Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason’, in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 11–34 (p. 21).

<sup>32</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 189.

between the two”, this serves to “*uphold* the basic undecidability between the ethical and the political, to stop, in other words, the ethical from ossifying into the *merely* ethical and the political into the *merely* political.”<sup>38</sup> Both negative theology and deconstruction operate at the intersection of ethics and politics, and theory and practice, an issue I shall consider in the final chapter of the thesis. In the case of negative theology, as Gregory Rocca points out, a gap has opened between its significance as a subject of a study and as a practice in the form of the *via negativa*. Rocca explains:

the so-called ‘negative way’ (*via negativa*) and negative, apophatic theology, though closely related, are not exactly the same. Negative theology often refers to a theory about how the divine predicates signify in the discipline of theology, even academically understood; and while *via negativa* can sometimes function as a synonym for negative theology so understood, it can also refer to a spiritual way or method by which one lives and thinks in order to arrive at union with God, and in this case it is not merely of academic interest but amounts to a life program with ascetic, moral, mystical, and spiritual elements.<sup>39</sup>

This tension between negative theology as a source of academic study and as a religious way of life, and the equivalent tension between deconstruction as a theoretical concern and a mode of political practice, provide a focus for the text ‘Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)’, Derrida’s final text on negative theology, to which I shall now turn.

Regarding Derrida’s earlier and later engagement with negative theology, Stephen D. Moore perceives a distinct shift in position, asserting that Derrida’s “cold suspicion” has “warmed into outright infatuation”.<sup>40</sup> Moore’s claim is perhaps an overstatement, however, ‘Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)’, an imagined dialogue between two speakers, is Derrida’s most sustained and deferential text towards the genre. In it, Derrida enacts the processes of negative theology and emphasises its affiliation with deconstruction. Like deconstruction, negative theology is, “briefly, a critique of ontology, of theology and of language” (50). ‘Sauf le nom’ proceeds from enquiries about the nature, function and relevance of negative theology, asking how these might be appropriately broached. “How, today”, the speaker asks, “can one speak- that is, speak together, address someone, testify- on the subject of and in the name of negative theology?”(46) Whereas ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ is

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<sup>38</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 212.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory P. Rocca, O.P., *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 1994), p. 41.

concerned with apophaticism in general, 'Sauf le nom' narrows its focus to the history and meaning of negative theology.

The text's observations in this area are constellated around readings of Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius and Pseudo-Dionysius, figures defined by Don Cupitt as "hard-core literary mystics".<sup>41</sup> Dionysius, in particular, is a crucial threshold figure in the history of negative theology, bridging between the Greek tradition of apophaticism deriving from Plato's *Parmenides* and developing through the work of Neoplatonists Plotinus and Proclus, and Christian thought, in his writings at the start of the sixth century A.D. For William Franke, Dionysius's work begins "the reinterpretation of the ineffable Neoplatonic One in terms of the transcendent God of monotheistic religion",<sup>42</sup> a reinterpretation, or rather, a dialogue between traditions, which is central to the development of negative theology. Similarly, Arthur Bradley highlights the importance of this synthesis, asserting: "Negative theology, as we understand the term today, is the result of an imaginative philosophical synthesis between the Christian concept of the revelation of Christ and the Neoplatonic concept of the transcendence of the One".<sup>43</sup> Deeply interested in Dionysius, the writer of 'Sauf le nom' looks to perform a similar 'imaginative synthesis' between the discourses of deconstruction and negative theology.

In light of Derrida's own work, Pseudo-Dionysius's writings have been considered proto-deconstructive; Jeffrey Fisher argues:

Dionysius gambles with high stakes, rising nihilism on the one hand and the semantic reinscription of affirmative theology on the other. He engages in a deconstructive maneuver both daring and deft: opening the door to nihilism while at the same time refuting even that form of closure to the mystical project.<sup>44</sup>

Arguing also that "the *différance* of God is played out by Dionysius in *The Mystical Theology*",<sup>45</sup> Fisher perhaps goes too far in his attempt to align Dionysius with Derrida, and overlooks important differences between the two figures.<sup>46</sup> Mary-Jane Rubenstein observes a disjunction between the "political vision" of Dionysius and Derrida's work, asserting that

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<sup>41</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Franke, p. 14. Franke's two volume text provides a comprehensive history of apophatic thought. Other accounts of the histories of apophasis and negative theology can be found in Rocca, p. 3-26, and in Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence* (Bonn: Hanstein Verlag, 1986).

<sup>43</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Fisher, 'The Theology of Dis/similarity: Negation in Pseudo-Dionysius', *The Journal of Religion*, 81.4 (October 2001), 529-548 (p. 535).

<sup>45</sup> Fisher, 529-548 (p. 540).

<sup>46</sup> See Turner, pp. 11-34 (p. 21).



Dionysius may be perceived as “radically elitist” as well as “radically welcoming”.<sup>47</sup> She contends that this, rather than any sense of Dionysius’s attachment to ontotheology, accounts for the times when Derrida “pulls back from Dionysius”.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, it is such a perceived attachment to ontotheology which results in Derrida’s ambivalence towards the work of Meister Eckhart.

Derrida’s early interest in negative theology is tempered by his belief that “negative theology is still a theology”,<sup>49</sup> and therefore, still ontotheological. For Don Cupitt, this position persists throughout Derrida’s work, becoming evident in his reading of Eckhart. Cupitt argues: “Derrida is reading Eckhart only in order to sniff out precisely what metaphysical dogma he teaches, and then consigning him to one camp or another accordingly”,<sup>50</sup> thus Derrida fails to see that “The mystic *has* to be a deconstructor”.<sup>51</sup> However, Derrida’s position is rather more nuanced than this. Whilst distancing himself from the ontotheological elements of Eckhart’s writing, he is fascinated by Eckhart’s “dazzling games with language”,<sup>52</sup> his subversion of institutional norms and his ambivalence towards language. Oliver Davies notes that language is, for Eckhart, both “the obstacle” and “the place of our redemption”,<sup>53</sup> a double functioning which parallels Derrida’s own approach to language, and also observes in his work, a “constant fluctuation of perspective”.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Denys Turner foregrounds Eckhart’s performativity, the way that “the language *performs rhetorically* what it says technically”,<sup>55</sup> and his desire that each linguistic instance should “contain all the paradoxical tensions of the theological project”.<sup>56</sup> It is similarities such as these, particularly concerning textuality, which enable Derrida to sketch the relationship between negative theology and deconstruction, and in so doing, to clarify the relationship between deconstruction, religion and the figure of God.

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<sup>47</sup> Mary-Jane Rubenstein, ‘Dionysius, Derrida and the Critique of “Ontotheology”’, in *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. by Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 195-211 (p. 206).

<sup>48</sup> Rubenstein, pp. 195-211 (p. 205).

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 97-192 (p. 183).

<sup>50</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism*, p. 97.

<sup>51</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism*, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism*, p. 95.

<sup>53</sup> Oliver Davies, ‘Introduction’, in Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. by Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. xi-xxxviii (p. xxxv).

<sup>54</sup> Oliver Davies, *God Within: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe*, rev. edn (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> Turner, pp. 11-34 (p. 32).

<sup>56</sup> Turner, pp. 11-34 (p. 33).

In the following two chapters, 'Dialogue' and 'Silence', I shall draw out the ways in which Derrida's use of these two discourses helps to develop his concept of God, and illuminates the ethical, religious and political implications of this concept. Containing readings of texts which engage with negative theology, these chapters will respond to what I perceive as the lack of attention to mode and genre in critical accounts of the relationship between negative theology and deconstruction. They will do this by demonstrating that Derrida's choice of mode is inextricably linked to the insights and tensions within the text, and that mode is particularly significant for Derrida's investigation of negative theology, a discourse which, as Hent de Vries contends, "reveal[s] the most significant modalities of language, meaning and reference 'as such'".<sup>57</sup> Paralleling the relationship between apophatic and kataphatic theologies, the discourses of dialogue and silence are modes adopted by negative theology itself, which both complement and challenge each other.

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<sup>57</sup> De Vries, p. 41.

## Chapter Two: Dialogue

Even there where there are dialogues, in Plato... these dialogues remain in the service of the monologic thesis. In my case - and I'm not going to compare myself with Plato! - monologism, univocity, a single voice- is impossible, and plurivocity is a non-fictional necessity, a necessity that I put to work in a fictional fashion of course but that is not feigned...

Jacques Derrida

Two texts, two hands, two ways of listening. Together simultaneously and separately.

Jacques Derrida

There are several voices already in the word.

Jacques Derrida

### 1. Introduction

Well-known for his adoption of unconventional writing modes, Derrida frequently incorporates dialogical elements, or “plurivocity”<sup>1</sup> into his writing.<sup>2</sup> He contends that dialogue enables the expression of the multiplicity of language; rather than being a mode which he imposes on a text, he insists that “the plurality of voices imposed itself in some way and I had to let it through”.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on plurality, difference and dialogue, is in part a challenge to the “authoritarian norm”<sup>4</sup> which commands that philosophy employ a linear, univocal and apparently transparent mode in order to preserve the appearance of privileged access to ‘truth’, and which Derrida reveals as a disavowal of philosophy’s inescapable entanglement with language. The result, however, is not a rejection of philosophy by Derrida, but a discourse which emphasises both “the philosophical experience *and* the poetic experience of the language”, and, through the assumption of heterogeneous modes, voices and registers, “causes one to think and causes the language to think, or philosophy in the language”.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I shall analyse two key expressions of the dialogical in Derrida’s writing. First, I shall summarise two critical accounts of Derrida’s ‘turn’: one authored by Slavoj

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Passages’, pp. 372-395 (p. 392).

<sup>2</sup> Texts which are dialogical in some form include ‘Tympan’, ‘The Double Session’, ‘Pas’, *Glas*, *The Truth in Painting*, ‘Envois’ in *The Post Card*, ‘At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am’, *Cinders*, and *Right of Inspection*.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, ‘Passages’, pp. 372-395 (p. 393).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Unsealing’, pp. 115-131 (p. 130).

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, ‘Passages’, pp. 372-395 (p. 375).

Žižek who looks to separate and recover the “earlier Derrida of *différance*”<sup>6</sup> from the “‘postsecular’ Messianic turn of deconstruction”,<sup>7</sup> and the other presented by Arthur Bradley who argues that the theological emphasis of Derrida’s later work privileges the transcendental resulting in an “empirical deficit”.<sup>8</sup> Suspending a response to the particularities of these critiques and their political implications until the end of the chapter, I will maintain that both critiques arise from the mistaken assumption of inconsistency in Derrida’s work, which, I will argue, is undermined by the consistently dialogical nature of the work. I will develop this claim by using examples from all stages of Derrida’s work to demonstrate that the deconstructive process takes place dialogically as movements between unstable poles. These are informed by the economic and non-economic elements which render *différance* “irreducibly polysemic”,<sup>9</sup> and recur in the later work through relationships such as that between law and justice or within the concept of hospitality, which incorporates conditional and unconditional elements. I will argue that despite any thematic shifts in Derrida’s work, this structural consistency is retained throughout Derrida’s work, and maintains the aporetic relationship between the empirical and the transcendental.

Secondly, I shall examine the “fictive dialogue”<sup>10</sup> ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’, and make the following claims. First, that the text is enabled by the dialogical mode, exhibiting dialogue between two apparently opposed speakers, between deconstruction and negative theology, and between the kataphatic and apophatic. In this way, the text manifests the “braided polyphony”<sup>11</sup> of all language, liberating the heterogeneity which is inhibited by logocentrism and in turn, generating new political possibilities. Further, I shall show that this dialogical mode draws out the similarities between deconstruction and negative theology, connecting them through their performativity, their attention to singularity, their preoccupation with language and its limits, and their negotiation of aporetic relationships between faith and critique and excess and economy. Consequently, I will argue that dialogue enables Derrida to begin to formulate a new type of non-logocentric writing or “*post-writing*” (53) which facilitates the articulation of a non-ontotheological God. Such a

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<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Žižek. *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 32).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp. 1-27 (p. 8).

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’, pp. 33-85 (p. 34). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Voice II’, trans. by Verena Andermatt Conley in *Points*, pp. 156-170 (p. 162).

God embodies the paradoxes in, and limits of, language, endlessly challenging and overcoming the boundaries of comprehension and translatability.

Finally, drawing upon these claims, I will return to the critiques of Žižek and Bradley, both of whom perceive Derrida's later religious focus to entail a depoliticization of deconstruction. Although their accounts are divergent, I will argue that both are restricted by their own political agendas. Articulating his own materialist relationship to Christianity, Žižek looks to dissociate himself from Derrida's Judaic heritage and deconstruction's meta- or ultra-political focus. Similarly, Bradley's focus on the technical and materialist futures of Derrida's work and his insistence on "operative value"<sup>12</sup> defy his affirmation of deconstruction. In contrast, I will suggest that the dialogical mode of deconstruction constantly reaffirms the essential undecidability of the relationship between ethics and politics, as well as that between politics and meta-politics, and insists upon our ethical and political responsibility to give due recognition to such undecidability. Further, in the case of 'Sauf le nom', the potential for a progressive politics derives from its religious focus, its suggestion that a 'post-writing' which rewrites the significance of the name of God may facilitate the possibility of a non-totalising community and the dissociation of unconditionality and sovereignty.

## **2. The 'Turn': Critical Responses and the Dialogical Nature of *Différance***

As I noted in the 'Introduction', although Derrida acknowledges a certain change "in the strategy of the text"<sup>13</sup> of his work, this is perceived as a development of earlier material and as an experimentation with style and mode, rather than as a decisive 'turn' away from, or contradiction of, previous texts.<sup>14</sup> Certain critics, however, reject this account, arguing that a 'turn' can be observed in Derrida's work, and that it should lead us to challenge or even reject either the earlier or the later work. One such critic is Slavoj Žižek.

Dismissing the contemporary re-emergence of religious interest as a "massive onslaught of obscurantism",<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek looks to separate and recuperate the "earlier

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<sup>12</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 34).

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, 'Epoché and Faith', pp. 27-50 (p. 37). Derrida is here referring specifically to his approach to the name of God.

<sup>14</sup> An earlier version of some of the material in this chapter can be found in Danielle Sands, 'Thinking Through *Différance*: Derrida, Žižek and Religious Engagement', *Textual Practice*, 22.3 (2008), 529-546.

<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 1.

Derrida of *différance*”<sup>16</sup> from what he terms the “‘postsecular’ Messianic turn of deconstruction”.<sup>17</sup> Žižek’s aim to reclaim the ‘earlier Derrida’ is accompanied by an attempt to align *différance*, to which he acknowledges a debt, with his own concept of “minimal difference”,<sup>18</sup> whilst disassociating himself from the religious and political elements of Derrida’s later work. However, I shall argue that Žižek mistakenly conflates *différance* with his own ‘minimal difference’ and consequently overlooks the dialogical nature of *différance* and its consistency throughout Derrida’s work.

It is only in the 2006 text *The Parallax View* that Žižek admits the, by now obvious, structural similarities between his work and deconstruction.<sup>19</sup> His approval of *différance* however, was suggested in a more critical context in 2003’s *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. Here Žižek declares:

I am tempted to suggest a return to the earlier Derrida of *différance*. What if Derrida’s turn to ‘postsecular’ messianism is not a necessary outcome of his initial “deconstructionist” impetus? What if the idea of infinite messianic justice which operates in an indefinite suspension, always to come, as the undeconstructible horizon of deconstruction, already obfuscates ‘pure’ *différance*, the pure gap which separates an entity from itself?<sup>20</sup>

This is Žižek’s formulation, by way of caricaturing the religious themes, of the question of whether Derrida’s later work ‘transcendentalizes the aporia’. However, Žižek’s claim that the later work obscures “‘pure’ difference” is fallacious, as “‘pure’ difference” refers rather to Žižek’s “minimal difference” than to the dialogical movements of *différance*. “Minimal Difference” is a phrase used by Žižek in *The Parallax View* to account for his reformulation of the concept of parallax. He takes a familiar definition: “the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational

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<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> He asserts that “now- when the Derridean fashion is fading away- is perhaps the moment to honor his memory by pointing out the proximity of this ‘minimal difference’ to what he called *différance*”, Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 11. He reiterates this claim (almost to the letter) in the article ‘A Plea for a Return to *Différance* (With a Minor *Pro Domo Sua*)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (Winter 2006) 226-249, a text which, despite its reference to Derrida in the title, pays remarkably little attention to Derrida, with any critique of the later Derrida derived directly from *The Parallax View* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. One cannot help thinking that Žižek invokes Derrida’s name to attract the interest that seems to follow it.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the description of Žižek’s work as “an endless enquiry into its own discursive conditions”, Rex Butler and Scott Stephens in Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 1-18 (p. 4). Žižek is also engaged in the suspiciously deconstructive practice of “the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its ‘unthought’, its disavowed presuppositions and consequences,” Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, front matter.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 141.

position that provides a new line of sight”<sup>21</sup> and amends it to suggest that the shift in perspective isn’t merely a subjective shift, but a shift which is constitutive of the object itself. He asserts: “it is at the very point at which a pure difference emerges- a difference which is no longer a difference between two positively existing objects, but a minimal difference which divides one and the same object from itself.”<sup>22</sup> This ‘pure’ or ‘minimal’ difference is elsewhere equated with *différance* as the latter is described as “the pure gap which separates an entity from itself.” However, as I shall demonstrate, Žižek’s idea of ‘pure’ *différance* is inconsistent with the conflicting, dialogical movements which constitute *différance*, and overlooks the importance of movement and force in thinking *différance*. *Différance* is “polysemic”<sup>23</sup> and names a dialogical relationship between two apparently oppositional poles or movements. This dialogical relationship, I shall argue, provides the model for the deconstructive process throughout Derrida’s work. Examining three of Derrida’s texts, typically early, middle and late, in which *différential* movements are foregrounded, I shall demonstrate the dialogical nature of *différance* as it is expressed throughout Derrida’s oeuvre, arguing that this consistency undermines Žižek’s assertion that the later Derrida betrays *différance*.

The essay ‘Différance’ offers Derrida’s most sustained discussion of the non-concept of *différance*, which is immediately spoken of in terms of movement and movements. There is not even a fixed position from which to begin speaking as *différance* disrupts this possibility: “*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name ‘origin’ no longer suits it,”<sup>24</sup> Derrida alleges. He describes *différance* through two interactive, dialogical, and apparently conflicting, movements. The word itself, he suggests, resonates with the two meanings of the Latin *differe*, to differ and to defer, it is “immediately and irreducibly polysemic.”<sup>25</sup> The first movement suggests the non-identical, intervals, separation and otherness, it is playful and blind in its progression, it doesn’t seek a return to self. This is the movement of spacing. The second movement, from *differe*, to defer, implies a detour or delay an economical “taking into account,”<sup>26</sup> in particular of time, and an inevitable return to the same. Derrida describes this as

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<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp. 1-27 (p. 8).

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p. 11).

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p. 8).

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p. 8).

temporization. These movements can be thought of as the non-economic and economic movements of *différance*, and Derrida goes on to expand them in Freudian terms.

The economic element of *différance* finds its equivalent in the pleasure principle (and later the reality principle) which strives for circularity, always seeking to return to the origin or same, to reinstate the presence which has been deferred by the *différential* movement. Accordingly, the non-economic aspect of *différance* relates to the death drive, in which full presence is recognised as impossible and the movement, instead of being circular in an attempt to recover presence, is pure excess and expenditure. It is, Derrida describes: “the entirely other relationship that apparently disrupts every economy.”<sup>27</sup> For Derrida, to deconstruct is to acknowledge the impossibility of self sameness and self presence, “to hold that no indivisibility, no atomicity, is secure”.<sup>28</sup> Thus same and other are always already implicated in a dynamic and dialogical relationship.

If, as ‘Différance’ insists, *différance* comprises two conflicting movements, which makes it ‘unthinkable’, this renders Žižek’s idea of “pure” *différance* meaningless; *différance* is internally impure, it is always already contaminated. Returning to Žižek’s definition of ‘pure’ *différance* as “the pure gap which separates an entity from itself,”<sup>29</sup> another discrepancy between *différance* and Žižekian “minimal difference” becomes evident. Žižek’s ‘pure gap’ is static, it mistakes *différance*, the movement which effects differences, for difference. Whenever Derrida emphasises this gap it is always as part of an energetic and interactive process, for example, he refers to “the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another”<sup>30</sup> and explicitly states, when discussing Nietzsche, that “*différance* is the name we might give to the ‘active’, moving discord of different forces.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, Žižek’s conception of ‘pure’ *différance* obscures Derrida’s own presentation of *différance* and clouds Žižek’s reading of Derrida’s later work. ‘Pure’ *différance* is itself meaningless and obfuscates Derridean *différance*. By looking at two later texts which explore the ethical and religious resonances of *différance* and replicate its dialogical movements, I shall demonstrate the consistency of *différance* throughout Derrida’s work and undermine Žižek’s claim of a “religious turn” which betrays *différance*. The texts I shall discuss are ‘Force of Law: On the Mystical Foundation of Authority’, first presented in 1989,

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p. 19).

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 309.

<sup>29</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 141.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p.17).

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p.18).



therefore representing the middle period, and a later work, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, published in 2005.

The description of the two movements within *différance* in the text 'Différance' finds its structural equivalent in the relationship between law and justice in 'Force of Law'. This text explores one of the ways in which *différential* movements function, demonstrating that they are always situated in an ethico-political context. I will focus on the first part of the text, 'Of the Right to Justice/From Law to Justice,' which considers the necessary violence in the process of founding laws and the way in which justice is implicated in this process.

The distinction with which Derrida begins is between law, as calculable, measured and determined, and justice as that which exceeds it, being, "without economic circularity, without calculation and without rules..."<sup>32</sup> For Derrida, it may be possible to accurately describe something as legal, but it is always impossible to label something just; justice is too shifting, too difficult to place. Not only do these movements of law and justice as economic and non-economic recall us to the *différential* movements, they are also, Derrida claims, both necessary for deconstruction. Deconstruction therefore, takes place between the deconstructible strictures of law and the undeconstructible and unlocatable idea of justice. The binary between law and justice which Derrida posited at the start of the text is definitively undermined by the inextricability of the relationship between law and justice, reflecting the double movement of *différance* and undermining Žižek's claim to a "pure" *différance*.

For Derrida, justice is already implicated in the process of instituting law; he maintains that "The very emergence of justice and law, the instituting, founding and justifying moment of law implies a performative force, that is to say always an interpretive force and a call to faith."<sup>33</sup> Derrida further expands this by elucidating Pascal's claim: "La justice sans la force est impuissante," by suggesting that "justice is not justice, it is not achieved if it does not have the force to be 'enforced'; a powerless justice is not justice, in the sense of law."<sup>34</sup> Within the conditions of possibility of justice is the assumption that it too relies on the necessary force of law, thus reinforcing the necessity of their dialogical relationship. This is elucidated by Derrida's earlier emphasis on the link between *différance* and force, to the "active' moving discord of different forces, and of differences of forces.' He

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 254).

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 241).

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 238).

recalls his usage of the word in 'Force of Law', noting that it is always used with vigilance, and that it must be recognised with regard to its own reversibility. He suggests: "What must be thought, therefore, is this exercise of force in language itself, in the most intimate of its essence, as in the movement by which it would absolutely disarm itself from itself."<sup>35</sup> This movement will reappear in *Rogues*, as the autoimmune pervertibility, or self-interruption of democracy.

This force of law relates to what Derrida, following Pascal, terms the *mystical foundation of authority*. This refers to the groundless nature of law and the performative violence which inaugurates it. This force through which a law is established can have no foundation to legitimise it, and equivalent force exercised after the construction of the law would be deemed illegal. Here, Derrida is remarkably close to Žižek, who insists on the contingency at the heart of the apparent necessity of law, and, "a certain reality of violence, which coincides with the very act of the establishment of the law."<sup>36</sup> Both thinkers insist that this contradiction within the concept of law must be concealed in order to retain the authority of the law; as Žižek explains: "what is 'repressed' then, is not some obscure origin of the Law but the very fact that the Law is not to be accepted as true, only as necessary- the fact that its *authority is without truth*."<sup>37</sup>

Throughout my discussion of 'Force of Law' I have been seeking to show how the relationship between law and justice reinscribes the dialogical movements of *différance*, and to thus disprove the Žižekian critique that the relationship between law and justice demands the introduction of something external to *différance*. Žižek's own attempt to escape the dialectic comes via the claim that "*the absolute excess is that of the Law itself*"<sup>38</sup> and is mirrored by the dynamic relationship between law and justice. "In their very heterogeneity," Derrida observes, "these two orders are indissociable."<sup>39</sup> Any strict binary between law and justice fails to account for the complexity of the relationship, for example the way in which the excessive origins of law mean that it too partakes in the incalculability

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<sup>35</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 238).

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 38. This point of similarity between Derrida and Žižek is noted by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens in their Glossary to *Interrogating the Real*, and causes them to question Žižek's intentions: "We might wonder, however, how different Žižek actually is from Derrida, whether there is not a systematic misreading by him of Derrida that allows a distinction between them to be drawn? For example, is Žižek's conception of the origins of Law fundamentally any different from that of Derrida in his 'Force of Law: On the Mystical Foundation of Authority'?" Rex Butler and Scott Stephens in Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 360.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 257).

of justice. Further, contrary to Žižek's argument, there is no protective gesture which guards against the unpredictability of deconstruction, as the two movements are 'indissociable'. Derrida at no point advocates putting an external limit on the non-economical or incalculable element of *différance*. He says:

Abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving [*donatrice*] idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation... An absolute assurance against this risk can only saturate or suture the opening of the call to justice.<sup>40</sup>

However, as we have already seen, the calculable is not something which can be made to 'step in' after the event to limit its consequences. This comes right back to *différance*, and to how and why 'Force of Law' is an analysis of *différential* forces in a particular context, rather than a misuse of *différance* as Žižek would argue. 'Force of Law' opens with a strict binary between law and justice which is then displaced, *différance* of course, being "the displacement of this oppositional logic,"<sup>41</sup> a movement of destabilizing and questioning which can never be apolitical. When Derrida declares that "Deconstruction is Justice,"<sup>42</sup> he refers to the *différential* movement in itself, rather than any additional "content" which may be added to it.

Just as the *différential* movements first presented in 'Différance' are exemplified by the relationship between law and justice in "Force of Law," *différance* also figures through the internal tension in the concept of democracy in Derrida's 2005 text *Rogues*. Derrida offers two differing readings of democracy which correspond with the dialogical movements of *différance*. Playing on tropes of circling and revolving, he identifies the first movement or truth of democracy as an economic movement which aspires to a return to same or self. A more concrete example of this is the way that democracy measures itself out, offering equal rights and equal access to opportunities. Derrida maintains: "it seems difficult to think such a desire for or naming of democratic space without the rotary motion of some quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self, toward the origin itself."<sup>43</sup> This movement often figures as a withdrawal into silence in order to preserve its sovereignty. There is, Derrida insists, no sovereignty without force (as there is no justice without the necessary "force of law") and

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<sup>40</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 257).

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 235).

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 243).

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. by Pascale Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005), p. 10.

therefore, “democracy would be precisely this, a force (*kratos*), a force in the form of a sovereign authority....”<sup>44</sup> There is however, no force without “differences of forces” and this reading of democracy is described alongside another truth of democracy. Derrida asserts that “the relationship between the commensurable and the incommensurable is what is at stake in democracy,”<sup>45</sup> evidently recalling the economic and non-economic movements of *différance*. The movement I have already described is that of the commensurable.

The second movement, that of the incommensurable, consists of heterogeneity, license and openness to the other. The passage to democracy often involves the taking of too many liberties and democracy itself gives freedom and indetermination rather than measured equality. Derrida suggests that freedom and equality “are reconcilable, so to speak, only in a turning or alternating fashion.”<sup>46</sup> These two movements are both constitutive of democracy yet cannot be thought together, as with the movements of *différance*. Derrida takes up Plato’s claim that democracy can never name a regime or constitution, and suggests that it can never be a concept either, as this schism between its two modes denies it a ‘proper’ or self-same identity.

This is not to be confused with a gap between the theory and practice of democracy; for Derrida, the “opening of indetermination and indecidability” is “*in the very concept of democracy*.”<sup>47</sup> Derrida refers to the aporia at the heart of democracy as the “autoimmune pervertibility of democracy.”<sup>48</sup> This describes the way in which democracy must, by its very nature, leave itself open to attacks on democracy in the very name of democracy. This double bind is akin to the structural flaws in democracy which Žižek describes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “the universal notion of ‘democracy’ is none the less a ‘necessary fiction’, a symbolic fact in the absence of which effective democracy, in all the plurality of its forms, could not reproduce itself.”<sup>49</sup>

*Rogues* itself brings us back to *différance*, describing it in terms virtually identical to those it used for one of the movements of democracy. Derrida affirms *différance* as “*undeniable* experience of the alterity of the other, of heterogeneity, of the singular, the not-same, the different, the dissymmetric, the heteronomous”<sup>50</sup> and refers to democracy through the ideas of differing and deferring which he used to lay out the structure of

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<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 148-9.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 38.

*différance*. Here he states that “the democratic *renvoi* spaces and diffracts more than one logic and more than one semantic schema,”<sup>51</sup> as demonstrated by the movements of commensurable and incommensurable previously described, and therefore “In both senses of *différance*, then, democracy is *différential*; it is *différance*, *renvoi*, and spacing.”<sup>52</sup> In ‘*Différance*’, Derrida refers to the interval which divides the present from what it is not as also dividing the present within itself thus creating the spacing of *différance*, and initiating what he calls “the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space.”<sup>53</sup> Derrida uses the same formula to describe the democratic in *Rogues*, thus demonstrating that the dialogical movements of *différance* recur throughout Derrida’s work, unsettling Žižek’s account of a ‘turn’ which betrays *différance*.

Žižek’s somewhat limited critique of Derrida’s ‘turn’ is rendered unsustainable by the structural consistency of Derrida’s work and the dialogical movements of *différance*, however, a more nuanced and challenging critique is offered by Arthur Bradley, who claims, following Bernard Stiegler, that Derrida’s later work displays a “transcendentalization of the aporia”.<sup>54</sup> Shifting considerably from his 2004 argument that Derrida’s use of negative theology provides a way to think the aporia between ethics and politics, Bradley’s 2006 article ‘Derrida’s God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn’ contends:

To understand Derrida’s work in terms of a quasi-religious vocabulary of the promise, the impossible or the messianic is... to reduce the material and historical scope of his work and even to evacuate the ethico-political dimension of deconstruction.<sup>55</sup>

To some extent, acknowledging Derrida’s consistency and dismissing accounts of a radical and unexpected ‘turn’ in Derrida’s work, Bradley offers an alternative narrative of Derrida’s

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<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, ‘*Différance*’, pp. 1-27 (p. 13).

<sup>54</sup> Stiegler is perhaps the most important author of, and influence on, accounts and developments of the technical and material in Derrida. His position towards Derrida is most comprehensively explicated in *Technics and Time*, available in translation as: Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*, trans. by Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) and *Technics and Time 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. by Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). See also Bernard Stiegler, ‘Derrida and Technology: Fidelity at the Limits of Deconstruction and the Prosthesis of Faith’, trans. by Richard Beardsworth in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 238-270.

<sup>55</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 22).

“passage from the material to the transcendental and ultimately the theological”.<sup>56</sup> Assenting to Stiegler’s assumption that Derrida’s work aims to articulate “an originary point of aporia that precedes and determines the oppositions between the transcendental and the empirical upon which the metaphysics of presence seeks to institute itself”,<sup>57</sup> Bradley argues that the later Derrida risks depicting this aporia as “entirely *independent* of the empirical”,<sup>58</sup> indeed as a transcendental condition. Bradley identifies three ways in which Stiegler critiques Derrida: first, Stiegler rejects Derrida’s “avowedly philosophical approach”<sup>59</sup> as retaining too close a link to the position to be deconstructed; secondly, Stiegler suggests that the historical expression of *différance* is underemphasised, leaving it at risk of interpretation as a “purely transcendental concept”;<sup>60</sup> and finally, these problems are intensified by Derrida’s ‘quasi-religious vocabulary’, which repeats the “de-fault” of metaphysics, “the disavowal or repression of its own technical finitude”.<sup>61</sup> This final point, expressed most fully in Stiegler’s essay ‘Fidelity at the Limits of Deconstruction and the Prosthesis of Faith’ forms the basis of Bradley’s own argument.

Bradley alleges that “over the course of Derrida’s career the empirical context and history of the aporia of origin is effaced as he resorts to increasingly transcendental means of articulating it,”<sup>62</sup> resulting in a “‘top downwards’ bias”.<sup>63</sup> Whereas the aporia is expressed through the “historical, material or technical processes”<sup>64</sup> in the earlier work, Derrida’s later work prefers “to translate the aporia through such concepts as the immemorial promise, originary hospitality to the other, or, increasingly, messianic time”.<sup>65</sup> Bradley, somewhat reductively, allies these two with Beardsworth’s ‘technical’ and ‘religious’ tendencies of deconstruction. Bradley’s argument has two key components. First, he uses examples of Derrida’s work on the gift, sacrifice and hospitality to illustrate the gap between the earlier, ‘material’ work, and the later, ‘theological’ work, reasoning that the latter privileges the transcendental in the expression of the aporia of origin, resulting in an “empirical deficit”.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 25).

<sup>57</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 25).

<sup>58</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 25).

<sup>59</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 26).

<sup>60</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 26).

<sup>61</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 26).

<sup>62</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, p. 28. For persuasive critiques of Stiegler’s critique of Derrida see Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Emergencies’, *Oxford Literary Review* 18 (1996), 175-216, and Ben Roberts, ‘Stiegler Reading Derrida: The Prosthesis of Deconstruction in Technics’, *Postmodern Culture* 16.1 (2005).

<sup>63</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 27).

<sup>64</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 28).

<sup>65</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 28).

<sup>66</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 32).

Secondly, Bradley disagrees with Derrida's approach to technics. Whereas Stiegler regards technics as a privileged way of understanding the aporia, Derrida is, according to Bradley, "constantly trying to avoid the simple or positivistic *equation* of the aporia with technics as if the latter were its proper name".<sup>67</sup> Bradley, along with other 'materialist' critics, is frustrated by the abstractions of Derrida's engagement with "history, matter or technology".<sup>68</sup> The latter is clearly the motivating force behind Bradley's critique, with the first element, the accusation of 'transcendentalization', expressed with surprising hesitancy. He cautions that the division between early and late Derrida, on which his argument depends, "should not be exaggerated",<sup>69</sup> only tentatively suggesting that "it seems to me that there is at least a danger that the theologically-inflected work begins to make the aporia *look* like a transcendental concept or logic that simply exists before, or outside of, history".<sup>70</sup> Admittedly, Derrida's references to "an immemorial *promise*"<sup>71</sup> or "*absolute* past"<sup>72</sup> do raise the spectre of the transcendental, however, like Žižek's critique, Bradley's position doesn't fully acknowledge the structural consistency of Derrida's work. This means that the 'immemorial', 'absolute' or unconditional is always experienced "*through* empiricity".<sup>73</sup> In addition to the examples I have already used, I want to reinforce this using two of Bradley's own examples: the gift and hospitality.

In Derrida's *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, in part a corrective to Mauss's economic model of the gift, Derrida maintains that the excessive and unconditional nature of the gift means that once it enters circular economy of gift giving and return, it is annulled. However, despite being "*aneconomic*",<sup>74</sup> the gift "would no doubt be related to economy".<sup>75</sup> As we have seen, this would not be an economical or dialectical relation, rather the two are connected dialogically. Derrida explains: "the overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this exteriority that sets the circle going, it is this exteriority that puts the economy in motion".<sup>76</sup> Although it is reductive to associate the gift, as incalculable or

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<sup>67</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 31).

<sup>68</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 32).

<sup>69</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 30).

<sup>70</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 30).

<sup>71</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 29).

<sup>72</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 30).

<sup>73</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 27).

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 30.

unconditional, with the transcendental and economy, as the conditional or calculable, with the empirical, it is clear that, for Derrida, the unconditional can never be expressed outside the limitations of empiricity. Similarly, in *Of Hospitality* Derrida argues that hospitality “marks the collision between two laws”: the first law is a law of “unlimited hospitality” which has no conditions, and the second describes the “conditions... norms... rights... and duties” which define our understanding of hospitality.<sup>77</sup> Thus the first is an absolute hospitality imagined outside of any social framework and the second illustrates the social and political elements which come into play when we situate hospitality experientially. Derrida insists that these two laws are indissociable: the demand of one for the other is constitutive of the concept of hospitality, which is formed by negotiation and dialogue between the terms, rather than a dialectical resolution. Derrida’s increased exploration of concepts and terms which Martin Hägglund deems ‘positively valorized’ causes critics such as Žižek to assume that Derrida’s philosophical or political position has shifted over time. Such an assumption, is, I have shown, undermined by the consistency of Derrida’s approach to such terms, an approach which reveals the dialogical relationship between the economical and non-economical, or conditional and unconditional elements which constitute each term or concept. Turning now to ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’, a text in which the dialogical nature of deconstruction is rendered explicit through Derrida’s use of different speakers and voices, I shall explore some of the implications of this dialogical mode, in particular, its impact on Derrida’s understanding of ‘God’.

### **3. Reading ‘Sauf le nom (Post Scriptum)’**

#### **(a) Dialogue, Deconstruction and Negative Theology**

Inspired by the “pluralized chorus” of negative theology,<sup>78</sup> Derrida asserts that the dialogical mode adopted by ‘Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)’ is “necessary” (35) if he is to speak at all, and, in particular, if he is to speak of God.<sup>79</sup> In my reading of this ‘fictive dialogue’, I shall

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<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 77.

<sup>78</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 37.

<sup>79</sup> The dialogical mode of the text is akin to the ‘double movement’ found in ‘Circumfession’. For an illuminating account of Derrida’s use of “double, or *clôtural*, reading” see Simon Critchley’s reading of ‘At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am’, Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p. 120.



demonstrate the importance of dialogue in the text, and argue that it enables Derrida to develop a “*post-writing*” (53) through which he can envisage a non-ontotheological God.

‘Sauf le nom’ takes place between two speakers discussing, and even enacting, the gestures of negative theology. At the start of the text, the speakers are largely distinguishable by their different concerns and perspectives, with one voice frequently linking the issues under consideration to deconstruction (43) and sustaining the vigilant critical questioning consonant with deconstruction, asking, for example, “By what right are these aphorisms, these sententious fragments, or these poetic flashes linked together, as if they formed the continuous tissue of a syllogism?” (42) The other voice endeavours to return the conversation to mysticism and negative theology, towards which s/he is generally credulous rather than critical. S/he looks to inform and discover rather than deconstruct and uses terms such as “essential” (36) and “proper” (37) rather more freely than her deconstructive counterpart. However, demonstrating that dialogue generates a cross-pollination of ideas, during the course of the text these positions shift, converge and even swap over.

For Arthur Bradley, the dialogical nature of the text is a response to negative theology; ‘Sauf le nom’ is thus “an attempt to bring out the plurality, the multiple voices at work behind and within the deceptively singular name and restricted tradition of negative theology”.<sup>80</sup> Often associated with a “voiceless voice” (35), or what I shall identify in the next chapter as ‘linguistic silence’, Derrida looks to assert that negative theology also speaks in divided and contradictory voices; it “says one thing and its contrary, God that is without being or God that (is) beyond being” (35). These voices form an exploratory dialogue, and so, reflecting this, the utterances of Derrida’s ‘theological’ speaker are themselves dialogical; s/he both speaks in the first person and rearticulates the aphorisms of Silesius and others.<sup>81</sup> This “unusual alliance of *two powers* and of *two voices*” (66) challenges the assumed ipseity of the experiencing subject and suggests that the identities of both God and subject are no longer restricted by “the proper or the self-same” (65). Negative theology “radically dissociates being and knowing, existence and knowledge. It is, as it were, a fracture of the *cogito*” (65-6).

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<sup>80</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 40.

<sup>81</sup> See for example: “*One knows not what one is*” and “*I am as God and God as I*” (p. 66).

'Sauf le nom' stages a dialogue between two interpretations of negative theology: first, that it has a fixed, transcendent "essence" (48) which is revealed through its historical manifestations, and secondly, that negative theology names only the totality of these instances and inscriptions, and is therefore a changeable, historical phenomenon. In performatively negotiating this question, and in rejecting the idea that negative theology is simply "a 'topic'?" (47) to be objectively analysed, the text also looks to clarify negative theology's relationship with deconstruction.

The historical manifestations of negative theology are received as a linguistic corpus, immediately raising the question of negative theology's relationship with language. In response to this, one of the speakers proposes that "What is called 'negative theology', in an idiom of Greco-Latin filiation, is a language [*langage*]" (48), a proposition that is nevertheless rendered provisional by the dialogical nature of the text and the constantly shifting positions of the two speakers.<sup>82</sup> The other speaker in turn responds that negative theology is rather that which questions and exceeds language, and that its essence remains outside language. The first speaker accepts these features of negative theology, but asserts that these are features of it *as a language*, asking "How does one leap out of this circle?" (48), a question which preoccupies Derrida throughout his work.

Negative theology's status as a language is complicated by its reflexivity, a reflexivity which, according to J. P. Williams, enables it to "escape the one-sidedness of either dogmatism or nihilism".<sup>83</sup> Here, the speaker describes negative theology as "the most intractable experience of the "'essence' of language" (54) in which "language and tongue speak for themselves" (54) as its "formalizing rarefaction" (49) is countered by a "poetic or fictional dimension" (54). Although evidently both post-scriptum and dialogue, the genre of 'Sauf le nom' is not clearly defined and thus, questions of reading and interpretation remain open. The first speaker's chastisement of the other's attempt to form a consistent, linear narrative from Silesius's aphorisms may be applied to our own reading practices with regard to 'Sauf le nom'. The speaker declares: "You cannot treat this peregrination of writing as a treatise of philosophy or theology, not even as a sermon or a hymn" (42), foregrounding both the performativity of the text and, as I shall demonstrate with regard to God, the

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<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to compare this to the opening of 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' whose content, although apparently similar, is expressed through a single speaker: "Under the very loose heading of 'negative theology', as you know, one often designates a certain form of language, with its *mise en scène*, its rhetorical, grammatical, and logical modes, its demonstrative procedures- in short a textual practice attested or even situated 'in history', although it does sometimes exceed the predicates that constitute this or that concept of history." Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 143).

<sup>83</sup> J. P. Williams, p. 9.

importance of space and place. This link between writing and performativity also connects to ideas of subjectivity and kenosis which are explored in the text. Rejecting a writing which creates and preserves the sovereignty of the self, the speakers observe the way in which Silesius conflates becoming writing and becoming divine, in aphorisms such as “Go and become yourself the writ and yourself the essence”(41). The development, or rather dissolution of subjectivity, “this becoming-self as becoming-God- or Nothing”(43) is enabled by a writing which becomes inseparable from subjectivity “in writing itself, in scripting itself [*en s’écrivant, en s’écriturant*]” (42).

Negative theology’s aim to avoid misleading, ontotheological designations for God leads the speakers to question its own ontological status and whether it is “a modality of ‘being’” (55). The problem of representing negative theology if it is not “something (determinable)” (55) recalls Derrida’s own earlier use of apophatic language. For Derrida, the structure of the trace enables language to bear witness to that which has no ontological essence. Thus, negative theology “would be nothing, very simply nothing, if this excess or this surplus (with regard to language) did not imprint some mark on some singular events of language and did not leave some remains on the body of a tongue...”(55). Consequently, it seems that negative theology is both within and without language. The theological speaker’s bold assertion that negative theology takes place “*over the edge*” (60) of language, and the deconstructive speaker’s affirmation that negative theology is always rooted within language, as “this jealous anger of language within itself and against itself” (59-60) are not resolved dialectically, rather the text’s dialogical mode enables both positions to be maintained simultaneously. The text as post-scriptum i.e. writing both after the event and as the event, resists a fixed resolution of this problem, instead, “It announces in a double sense: it signals an open possibility, but it also provokes thereby the opening of the possibility. Its event is at once revealing and producing, *post-scriptum* and prolegomenon, inaugural writing” (64). In this way, ‘Sauf le nom’ both reinforces the traditional gestures of negative theology, and, as Arthur Bradley asserts, repeats them otherwise. Bradley contests that “Derrida seeks to listen to negative theology’s *other* voice, then, the voice that questions every certitude including its own, that refuses to remain content within any theological, institutional or political doctrine or body and surrenders itself to an unknowable object”, a voice which acknowledges “the alterity of the other ”.<sup>84</sup> However, this voice which “radically contests the tradition from which it seems to come” (67),

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<sup>84</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 42-3.

remains in dialogue with this tradition, creating a deconstructive double movement, an “uprooting rooting” (67), or “*double truth of filiation*” (73) which situates negative theology both inside and outside tradition. This parallels Derrida’s own relationship to his philosophical predecessors, characterised as a “filial lack of piety.”<sup>85</sup> Consequently, deconstruction and negative theology are again linked by the methodological similarity of this insistent plurality of voices or double movement which generates both a “rupture” (67) and “a *countersignature*, even if it denies this” (68).

The speakers stress the elements of tension and dialogue within the history and practice of negative theology, recalling the interaction between the Greek philosophical and mystical Christian traditions, which produced the current understanding of negative theology. These two different but conversant approaches are echoed by the theological and deconstructive positions which intersect in ‘Sauf le nom’, and are described by the speaker as “these two trajectories, these two paths [*trajets*] thus arrowed would cross each other in the heart of what we call negative theology” (62).<sup>86</sup> A similar dialogue or tension is also exposed within the Christian tradition, between negative theology as a constitutive part of institutional Christianity, and, like deconstruction in its relation to philosophy, as a parasitic practice of constant critique; as such, “two concurrent desires divide apophatic theology” (83). In addition to exploring the tensions within apophaticism, ‘Sauf le nom’ also engages in a broader theological debate, considering the interaction and dialogue between the apophatic and the kataphatic.

‘Sauf le nom’ maintains that the “purely apophatic instance” (51) is always counterbalanced by the plenitude of a prayer, hymn or other affirmative utterance.<sup>87</sup> Thus the speaker describes, “the measure of a *relation*, and this relation is stretched between two poles, one of which must be that of positivity de-negated” (51). The tension between affirmation and negation is inevitable when speaking of God, and William Franke describes the contradiction between the “strict unsayability of God according to his essence” and “the prolix languages about him in relation to the created universe”.<sup>88</sup> Derrida’s response is to

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<sup>85</sup> Derrida, ‘Dialanguages’, pp. 132-155 (p. 151).

<sup>86</sup> This cross or chiasmus is itself a symbol which brings together Christianity and deconstruction. For a discussion of the significance of the chiasmus for deconstruction see Rayment-Pickard.

<sup>87</sup> See also Oliver Davies’s alternative view that whereas ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ intertwines the negative with the positive, ‘Sauf le nom’ separates the two: Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 126.

<sup>88</sup> Franke, p. 16. Franke argues that this tension is to some extent resolved by Dionysius’s claim that we can come to know God through Creation. He explains: “The purely transcendent One and the existing One are actually a

underline the dynamic relationship between affirmation and negation, and to use the term ‘de-negation’ rather than reinforcing a simplistic binary. In this way, he looks to demonstrate both that the ‘apophatic instant’ is not purely mechanical, and that the connection between apophatic and kataphatic theologies cannot be reduced to dialectic.

Following Aquinas, the relationship between kataphasis and apophasis is often characterised as dialectical.<sup>89</sup> Proponents of this view include Jeffrey Fisher, who sees the emergence of theological language “in the transcendence of the conjunction” between the two terms,<sup>90</sup> Kevin Hart,<sup>91</sup> and Denys Turner, who asserts: “The apophatic therefore presupposes the cataphatic ‘dialectically’ in the sense that the silence of the negative way is the silence achieved only at the point at which talk about God has been exhausted”.<sup>92</sup> Turner traces this back to the interdependence of the kataphatic and apophatic in Pseudo-Dionysius’s works *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*; arguing that Dionysius’s work “shows the dialectical pulsation between affirmations and negations that characterises the enterprise of Christian negative theology as a whole”.<sup>93</sup> Derrida roundly rejects this dialectical interpretation of negative theology, insisting in ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ that “this de-negation does not give dialectic a chance”.<sup>94</sup> Such a rejection has its theological roots in Eastern Orthodox tradition, with Rowan Williams expressing Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky’s view that “the conventional Western view of the apophatic method as essentially a corrective to cataphatic theology, a qualification which acts as a necessary dialectical stage between the *via affirmativa* and the *via eminentiae*, is a misunderstanding of its real nature.”<sup>95</sup> Lossky instead insists upon the superiority of apophaticism to kataphaticism, a position he ascribes to Dionysius himself.<sup>96</sup> This results in two different types, or interpretations of negative theology. J. P. Williams elucidates:

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unity in Dionysius- like the negative and affirmative methods of theology, which necessarily work together”, Franke, p. 20.

<sup>89</sup> See Gregory P. Rocca, O.P., *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

<sup>90</sup> Fisher, 529-548 (p. 548).

<sup>91</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 193.

<sup>92</sup> Denys Turner, ‘Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason’, in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 11-34 (p. 18).

<sup>93</sup> Turner, p. 3.

<sup>94</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 163).

<sup>95</sup> Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. by Mike Higon (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> Franke reinforces this, asserting that “Dionysius accords priority to the negative way”, Franke, p. 16.

In summary, the two competing theories of apophasis are: first, a negation which is complementary to affirmation and is anterior to a transcendent or superlative affirmation about the divine; or second, a negation which is posterior to both affirmations and first-order negations about the divine<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, tracing this division back to Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory Rocca asserts:

It is hard to escape the conclusion that to some degree Dionysius recognizes two kinds of negative theology: one is exoteric and forms a dialectic with the assertions of affirmative theology, while the other is an esoteric mystical unknowing based on the dark ascents. This second type is not a part of discursive theology at all since its primary act is silence and its object is the God beyond reason.<sup>98</sup>

Derrida is alert to such a division within negative theology, and his rejection of dialectic appears to align him with the second position, of which J. P. Williams goes on to explain:

The apophatic negation of negation offers a different approach to the divine. Through its dialectical affirmation, negation and subsequent negation of both preceding stages, it creates a contradiction which cannot be resolved in favour of either of the contradictory positions, or of a third position, even that of no-position. Now the mind can only 'hover' between the poles of the contradiction, affirming both and neither, negating both and neither.<sup>99</sup>

Here, rather than describing two different views or types of negative theology, Williams argues that they are two stages of the same process which are, therefore, not opposed and cannot be resolved dialectically, particularly as the second stage consists of transcending dialectical modes of thought and expression. The tension which emerges in the second stage, that "apophasis can actually be apprehended only in discourse- in language insofar as it negates itself and tends to disappear as language",<sup>100</sup> is a primary focus for 'Sauf le nom'.

Denying a dialectical resolution to the two stages of the apophatic process as it would necessitate a reduction of difference to the same, Derrida maintains his dialogical approach, aiming for the development of a discourse which would be irreducible to binary terms and dialectic. Here again, negative theology provides the model, with Derrida linking

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<sup>97</sup> J.P. Williams, p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Rocca, p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> J. P. Williams, p. 8. See also John Jones's similar definition: "On the one hand, negative theology functions within affirmative theology or, more specifically, metaphysical to express the pre-eminence of the divine cause. Here, if you will, the negations are 'super affirmations'. On the other hand negative theology provides for mystical unity with the divinity. Here negative (mystical) theology denies all that is and all reference to beings and, by my interpretation, ultimately denies all affirmative theology and hence, all metaphysics", John Jones cited in Hart, *Trespass*, p. 200.

<sup>100</sup> Franke, p. 1.

deconstruction, “the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible”, to Angelus Silesius’s use of ‘de-negation’ to introduce “an absolute heterogeneity in the order and in the modality of the possible”, thus conceiving, “what appears impossible, more than impossible, the most impossible possible, more impossible than the impossible if the impossible is the simple negative modality of the possible” (43). In the next section, I shall consider how negative theology’s challenge to the limits of expression motivates Derrida’s mode of “*post-writing*” (53).

### (b) ‘Post-writing’ and Rethinking God

In ‘Sauf le nom’, Derrida draws out the plurivocity of both deconstruction and negative theology, and places them in dialogue with each other. The dominance of the dialogical mode is for Derrida, not a contrivance but a ‘non-fictional necessity’ which develops from attentive listening and enables an alternative form of thought or writing, unbound by logocentric norms. This singular or idiomatic mode, which would exceed “the irresponsible unfolding of a program” (59), he terms ‘post-writing’.<sup>101</sup> In this section, I shall examine this idea of ‘post-writing’ and draw out its connections to Derrida’s understanding of God.

In ‘Sauf le nom’, Derrida speaks of the “end of monologism- and of what follows...” (35) and it is clear that his use of the dialogical mode in the text, or rather his lifting of the prohibition on plurivocity, directly enables ‘post-writing’, recalling the ‘athetic writing’ I discussed in Chapter One. This idea of liberating writing from certain imposed constraints recalls his discussion of the end of the book in *Of Grammatology*. There, Derrida explained, “the idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and [...] against difference in

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<sup>101</sup> It is important that the ‘post’ of ‘post-writing’ is not understood as reinforcing familiar notions of closure and chronology, but as both challenging such notions and as signifying a certain otherness. Recall Derrida’s insistence in ‘In Discussion with Christopher Norris’: “As you know, I never use the word ‘post’, the prefix ‘post’; and I have many reasons for this. One of those reasons is that this use of the prefix implies a periodisation or an epochalisation which is highly problematic for me. Then again, the word ‘post’ implies that something is finished- that we can get rid of what went before Deconstruction, and I don’t think anything of the sort”, Jacques Derrida, ‘In Discussion with Christopher Norris’, in *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, Catherine Cooke and Andrea Papadakis (London: Academy Editions, 1989), pp. 71-5 (p. 72). For a comparable scepticism towards the “linear chronology” implied by the prefix ‘post’, see Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-‘, in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (Harlow: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 47-50 (p. 48).

general”.<sup>102</sup> In this way, Derrida’s appeal to ‘post-writing’, and his alliance with negative theology, that which challenges the institutional sureties of theology from within, and explores ambiguity and heterogeneity, are consistent with his life-long attention to difference.

Following this prediction in *Of Grammatology*, ‘Sauf le nom’ explicitly rejects the totality of the book. It presents itself as a post-scriptum, self-consciously referring to its own false starts, pretexts, prolegomena and post-scripta, undermining its own autonomy and sovereignty and rendering itself strangely absent or aporetic. It appears as a decontextualised fragment which celebrates its own contrived artificiality as inscription of a ‘fictive dialogue’. This act of ‘post-writing’ challenges the primacy of speech over writing, the assumption of linear temporality, the possibility of distinct, uncontaminated genres, the boundaries between inside and outside, and our understanding of the event as that which precedes its inscription. ‘Post writing’ is excessive, exceeding familiar limits. It has no absolute beginning; in the case of negative theology, it proceeds from “this astonishing *fact*[fait], this *already done* [déjà fait], this *all done* [tout fait]” (53) and engages in “repeating, continuing, importing and transporting” (52). In recording the events of negative theology, a discourse which is formed and sustained by the inscription and transmission of experiences which exist on the limits of comprehension and language, this ‘post-writing’, is always challenging the limits of expression, as well as the infinity of signification. Always performative, uninhibited, the destination of this writing can never be secured, rather its address is always divided, multiplied, echoing the passage of the apophatic apostrophe which is, “at once vertical and horizontal”.<sup>103</sup>

The concept of ‘post-writing’ is developed through its links to translation and prayer, both of which engage with the limits of language. Translation is determined by the limits between and beyond language, and thus, “the untouchable (*unberhrbar*) is what fascinates and orients the work of the translator”.<sup>104</sup> Negative theology is understood as “the chance of an incomparable translatability without limit” (47) and the colloquium which generates the post-scriptum is itself inspired by experiences of translation. Derrida understands translation not as a step towards “a universal tongue” (47) or the diminution of difference, but as negotiating the passage between the singular and the general, without

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<sup>102</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, rev. edn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Rubenstein, pp. 195-211 (p. 205).

<sup>104</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’, trans. by Joseph F. Graham in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 104-134 (p. 124).



ever losing sight of the singularity of the idiom. Derrida describes how negative theology similarly negotiates this limit, relying on affirmation and prayer to prevent the discourse becoming wholly formalisable and mechanically replicable. He asserts in 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials': "I will try to show how negative theology claims, at least, not to be assimilable to a technique that is exposed to simulacrum and to parody, to mechanical repetition. It escapes from these by means of the *prayer* that precedes apophatic utterances."<sup>105</sup> Derrida also emphasises the performativity of prayer; it is a practice which incorporates both faith and scepticism and thus "has more than one edge at the same time".<sup>106</sup> Its "suspension of certainty"<sup>107</sup> renders it challenging and exploratory, rather than functioning as a simple reinforcement of institutional norms and discourses, making it a discourse suited to both theist and atheist.

Unlike the book, which masquerades as a completed totality, 'post-writing' draws attention to its status as unfinished or in process; it is "a tongue to come" (47), which is "always on the way" (68). Such a writing is therefore, open to dissonant modes and voices and always plurivocal; it "cannot be a simple mark identical to self" (61) and it allows "language and tongue [to] speak for themselves" (54). It is this incursion of 'post-writing' into 'Sauf le nom' which triggers the blurring of boundaries between speaking subjects, between public and private and between Derrida's text and those of others. Here, in this post-scriptum which enacts "the coming of a writing after the other" (61), recalling Derrida's claim in 'Circumfession' that 'one always confesses the other' it seems particularly apt that Derrida's text overlaps with Augustine's *Confessions*, as in the midst of philosophical enquiry, the speaker describes, "this place of retreat you invited me to, in this town of familial exile where your mother has not finished dying, on the shore of the Mediterranean..." (40-1). It is clear from such examples that 'post-writing' is inescapably contaminated, plurivocal and impure; it embraces difference and non-sovereignty. This writing is the inevitable consequence of the realisation, expressed so firmly in 'Circumfession', that:

it is the idea itself of an identity or a self-interiority of every tradition (*the one* metaphysics, *the one* onto-theology, *the one* phenomenology, *the one* Christian revelation, *the one* history itself, *the one* history of being, *the one* epoch, *the one*

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<sup>105</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 144).

<sup>106</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Epoché and Faith', pp. 27-50 (p. 30).

<sup>107</sup> Derrida, 'Epoché and Faith', pp. 27-50 (p. 31).

tradition, self-identity in general, the one, etc.) that finds itself contested at its root.  
(71)

In 'Sauf le nom' Derrida draws on negative theology because it "is one of the most remarkable manifestations of this self-difference" (71). This self-difference emerges through the dialogical mode of the text and its exploration of the divided aims of the discourse, which is both central to Christian history and "anxious to render itself independent of revelation" (71). Nonetheless, negative theology often denies this difference. The theologically-focused speaker in 'Sauf le nom' recounts negative theology's persistent emphasis on sovereignty and propriety in its "Desire to say and rejoin what is *proper* to God" (69). This desire is rendered absurd by negative theology's own insight that God must precede and exceed such ontological categories; as the other speaker rejoins: "-But what is this proper, if the proper of this proper consists in expropriating itself, if the proper of the proper *is* precisely, justly [*justement*], to have nothing of its own [*en propre*]? What does 'is' mean here?" (69). This questioning of the limits of ontology, and in turn, rejection of the God of ontotheology, generates many questions regarding the nature and significance of God.

Following Derrida's engagement with the question of 'God' in his texts on negative theology, Oliver Davies observes that "the radical otherness of God can at any point emerge as address from within language itself: 'God' can again become 'word'".<sup>108</sup> Davies continues: "God as presence-absence is already inscribed within the language, as trace and memory, and, once thought, cannot easily be set aside".<sup>109</sup> This inescapable theocentrism of language is Derrida's starting point with regard to the question of 'God' in 'Sauf le nom'. Given the impossibility of eliminating every trace of 'God' within language, and the possibility that any attempt to doing so could lead to ontotheological recuperation, Derrida looks for other ways of interpreting and approaching the name of God, even of 'saving the name' of God.

The question of God arises as the speakers discuss negative theology and language. God is akin to a "certain absolute secret" (59) within language, the "unnameable nameable" who lies "beyond the name" (59). The speakers disagree as to whether God can and should be revealed or unveiled, as language is "sealed with an indecipherable signature" (60) which is

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<sup>108</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 128.

<sup>109</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 129.

“legible-illegible” (60). In navigating this question of God, which gestures to the limits of language, the speakers themselves traverse these limits, the text “withdrawing and overflowing” (60), and the speakers still divided as to whether such linguistic movements can ever be transcended, whether language, which “prescribes overflowing this insufficiency”, and “necessitates going (*Geh*, Go!) there where one cannot go” (59), is condemned to repeat the same gestures.<sup>110</sup> Here, the theological speaker is consistently orthodox, insisting that negative theology speaks “in the name of a way of truth” (69), providing a mode ‘proper’ to God through which “the forgotten secret” may be “unveiled” (69). Paradoxically, the frequent negotiation and re-inscription of limits which looks to clarify positions, serves only to blur the division between inside and outside, and the perspectives of the two speakers.

Throughout the text, Derrida exploits the ambiguity of ‘saving’ the name as both retaining and excepting it. The name of God is a marker of the exterior of language functioning within language, and thus “effaces itself in front of what it names” (68). However, ‘Sauf le nom’ again complicates this division between interior and exterior, with Graham Ward asserting that: “there is no pure outside, and therefore no experience of the outside as such”.<sup>111</sup> The ‘exterior’ is instead reproduced and secreted on the inside, even the limit of language itself, the edge “between language and the world”, as Oliver Davies describes, “becomes internalized, taken *into* language, as the ‘asceticism’, ‘kenosis’, or ‘passion’ of language itself”.<sup>112</sup> As such, language becomes condemned to a certain reflexivity, and the name of God, previously signifying the originary creator of language and “absolute witness”,<sup>113</sup> outside of language, now represents an incomprehensible trace of an inaccessible exterior, lodged firmly on the interior. Consequently, Arthur Bradley argues that Derrida reveals negative theology’s God to be “*nothing other* than this essential openness or incompleteness of language which has always already started and will never be absolutely finished.”<sup>114</sup> This ‘incompleteness of language’ sees the distinction between

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<sup>110</sup> On this point, Shira Wolosky claims that “Instead of confirming the apophatic intuition against language, Derrida’s analysis implies that apophasis itself takes place within language and can never be disengaged from it” Wolosky, 261- 280 (p. 268).

<sup>111</sup> Graham Ward, “‘In the Daylight Forever?’: language and silence”, in *Silence and the Word*, as before, p. 178. On this, see also Mark Taylor’s assertion that “The analysis of divine scripture discloses the interiority of exteriority”, Mark C. Taylor, *Erring*, p. 15.

<sup>112</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 128.

<sup>113</sup> Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, pp. 42-101 (p. 65).

<sup>114</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 32.

interior and exterior internalised, producing “transcendence in immanence”<sup>115</sup> or “an absolute transcendence that announces itself within” (70). Further, as Oliver Davies asserts of Derrida, the enclosure of language “creates in him (or in language, as he would say) a deep longing for the other, the impossible exterior”,<sup>116</sup> which is expressed as a personal, individual desire as he “invests language itself with the properties of subjectivity”.<sup>117</sup> This interiorised exterior is sometimes expressed through the Platonic non-concept of *khōra*, for Davies, an inscription of “the extra-linguistic real... drifting as a non-spatial entity across and over the boundaries of language (world) and world (language).”<sup>118</sup>

In ‘Sauf le nom’, *khōra*, the place wherein the demiurge inscribed the Forms in Plato’s *Timaeus*, emerges as an example of the connections between “the experience of place” (57), God, and that which defies conceptualization and can only be expressed negatively. Preceding the distinctions between sensible and intelligible, *mythos* and *logos*, *khōra* forms an *aporia* or “irreducible spacing”<sup>119</sup> within the Platonic system, and is described using dialogical languages in order to approach its radical otherness. *Khōra* is also linked to God as both foreground the problem of naming and are thus reflexive or “sur-names” (84). In addressing God, negative theology looks “toward the beyond of the name *in* the name” (59), and *khōra*, as the “singular without concept” (40), has an “impossible relation to the possibility of naming”.<sup>120</sup> Both God and *khōra* displace “all our onto-topological prejudices” (56) and demand of us a mode of address which is not idolatrous or anthropomorphic. However, as Derrida explores in ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, unlike the name of ‘God’ and negative theology, *khōra* initiates a mode of *apophasis* which is not delimited by “a history and an anthropo-theological dimension”.<sup>121</sup> Instead *khōra* is:

The name for place, a place name, and a rather singular one at that, for that spacing which, not allowing itself to be dominated by any theological, ontological or anthropological instance, without age, without history and more ‘ancient’ than all oppositions (for example that of sensible/intelligible) does not even announce itself as ‘beyond being’ in accordance with a path of negation, a *via negativa*. As a result, *chora* remains absolutely impassable and heterogeneous to all processes of historical revelation or of anthropo-theological experience, which at the very least suppose its

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<sup>115</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 99.

<sup>116</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 126-7.

<sup>117</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 127.

<sup>118</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 127.

<sup>119</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 172).

<sup>120</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘*Khōra*’, trans. by Ian McLeod, in *On The Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995), pp. 89-127 (p. 91).

<sup>121</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 183).

abstraction. It will never have entered religion and will never permit itself to be sacralized, sanctified, humanized, theologized, cultivated, historicised.<sup>122</sup>

In the Introduction I discussed John Caputo and Richard Kearney's contention that Derrida must, and does, choose between 'God' and the "absolute exteriority"<sup>123</sup> of khōra. In 'Sauf le nom' however, the two terms are not presented oppositionally, rather the latter is a condition of the former; as Hugh Rayment-Pickard maintains, "the vacation, kenosis, desertion or Gelassenheit of khōra 'opens up the play of God'".<sup>124</sup> As Graham Ward perceives, the subsequent 'play', "between the trace as God and the trace as absolute instability, the play between plenitude and void",<sup>125</sup> is interminable. Further, in 'Sauf le nom', Derrida's invokes khōra as part of the search for a language for God which avoids the idolatry and anthropomorphism of historical accounts, as khōra names "a site [*lieu*] where the proper no longer has any meaning".<sup>126</sup>

Such a language would be, for Derrida, profoundly rooted in the body. "The event remains *in* and *on* language", he discloses, "in and on the mouth", more specifically, "on the tip [*bout*] of the tongue" (58). These images again focus on limits and edges: of language, of the body and of the subject; the surface is "exposed, overflowed, outside of itself" (58). This excess and exposure in turn leads to the blurring of distinctions, not only between speakers but between subject and object, as the movements of language "name God, speak of him, speak him, speak to him, let him speak in them, let themselves be carried by him..." (58). These movements, the opposite of a clearly apportioned monologue, undermine any discernible agent or agency and gesture towards a less rigid conception of subjectivity. Likewise, when the speaker refers to "the desire *of* God" (37), its equivocality, in short "does it come from God in us, from God for us, from us for God?" (37), leads the speaker to consider the effect of the genitive, here erroneous, as they are endeavouring to think about the origin of subject and object before these are reified in language, before "the grammatical or ontological upsurge of a subject or an object"(37). Consequently, 'God', or, 'the desire of God', appears to name the structure of subject formation; no self-relation precedes the 'desire of God', which is here glossed as the "relation to the other" (37).

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<sup>122</sup> Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', pp. 42-101 (p. 58).

<sup>123</sup> Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', pp. 42-101 (p. 57).

<sup>124</sup> Rayment-Pickard, p. 161.

<sup>125</sup> Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), p. 189.

<sup>126</sup> Derrida, 'Khōra', pp. 89-127 (p. 105).

Acknowledging that both apophaticism and atheism testify to this 'desire of God', the speaker suggests that even the atheist requires the structural function of the witness to be fulfilled. Looking to clarify the relationship between 'God' and language, the first speaker declares that "God' is the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language" (55-6). This figure of desertification signifies a double movement which both enacts the reduction to a skeletal language, in essence a "negative operation" (56), whilst ensuring that this is "inscribed *in* and *on* and *as* the *event*" (56), and therefore persists through the trace. This becoming-event is a process which "finds in this *kēnosis* the most decisive condition of its coming or its upsurging" (56), and this suggests that we rethink God as movement or verb, rather than fixed noun, as well as exceeding ontological categories, as "it is said that he names nothing that is, neither this nor that"(56). Elsewhere, Derrida suggests that language "is the name of God naming itself through the voice of God",<sup>127</sup> suggesting that it is the very reflexivity of language which foregrounds its simultaneous otherness, the inaccessible trace enclosed within it.

Such definitions diverge from the concept of God as discrete, transcendent, self-same and self-sufficient, facilitating instead, a plurality of definitions of God in dialogue with each other, definitions which include God, as the 'desertification of language' or "the divinity of God as gift or desire of giving" (56). The adoption of conflicting utterances- here, figures of emptiness and plenitude- to describe God, is a familiar apophatic device, for example, Oliver Davies refers to Eckhart's "tendency to contradict himself when presenting a theology of God".<sup>128</sup> This tendency serves as a reminder of God's transcendence, and echoes Pseudo Dionysius's refusal to conceptualize God in his writing.<sup>129</sup> Here, Derrida directly follows the precedent of negative theology, endeavouring "to save the name of God, to shield it from all onto-theological idolatry" (62). Here however, the deviation of such definitions of God from that which is 'proper', self-same or sovereign also has political implications. As Derrida describes at length in the seminars published as *The Beast and the Sovereign*, the figure of the sovereign which sustains the tyranny of modern political sovereignty is grounded in an "anthropo-theological"<sup>130</sup> model which derives from the figure of an eternal and all-powerful God. Consequently, a shift in thinking about God could inaugurate a new perception of power. Similarly, in 'Epoché and Faith', he explains:

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<sup>127</sup> Derrida, 'The Eyes of Language', pp. 189-227 (p. 207-8).

<sup>128</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. by Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994), p. xxxiii.

<sup>129</sup> Rubenstein, pp. 195- 211 (p. 201).

<sup>130</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 14.

I have tried again and again to dissociate two concepts that are usually indissociable: unconditionality and sovereignty... If I think of God on the side of grace, forgiveness, hospitality, unconditional law, then in order not to have to agree with what I call the onto-theological tradition of sovereignty, one has to dissociate God's sovereignty from God, from the very idea of God. We would have God without sovereignty, God without omnipotence. If one thinks of this possibility of the name of God being dissociated from the absolute power, then this would be a strategic political lever to think of unconditionality without sovereignty, and to deconstruct the political concept of sovereignty today, which I would argue is a heritage of onto-theology.<sup>131</sup>

Here Derrida directly asserts the political import of his re-conceptualization of God, which is at the root of how we might rethink notions of power and identity, as well as ethical concepts such as commitment and responsibility. The name of God is, he says, 'a strategic political lever'. Such a claim would appear to challenge the critiques by Žižek and Bradley that the religious focus of Derrida's later work is depoliticising, or even Beardsworth's assertion that these elements are allied with right-wing possibilities for deconstruction. In the final section of this chapter, I shall return to those critiques, and to the question of the political potential of deconstruction.

#### **4. Responding to Derrida's Critics: Political and Religious Futures of Deconstruction**

Although dissimilar in motivation and expression, the critiques of Derrida presented by Žižek and Bradley both include the mistaken claim of Derrida's inconsistency and the assertion that the messianic focus of Derrida's later work depoliticizes deconstruction.<sup>132</sup> Both look to advance an alternative understanding and practice of the political. In the final section of this chapter, I shall address the question of depoliticization, arguing that, restricted by their own political agendas, Žižek and Bradley present rather unbalanced accounts of the relationship between the religious or messianic and the political in Derrida's later work which renders their critiques unconvincing. However, as Derrida's engagement

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<sup>131</sup> Derrida, 'Epoché and Faith', pp. 27-50 (p. 42).

<sup>132</sup> This is slightly different from Beardsworth who, in addition to associating the religious elements of Derrida's work with depoliticization, suggests that these elements are allied with right-wing politics. Here I shall focus on depoliticization, however, following Derrida's claim that the name of God may function as a 'a strategic political lever to think of unconditionality without sovereignty', there is doubtless a case to be made against Beardsworth's proposed alliance.

with the discourses of negative theology and dialogue demonstrates, their critiques gesture towards a residual tension in Derrida's work between the private nature of religious experience and the public experience of the political.

Žižek's critique of Derrida is selective and sporadic. It aims to contrast Derrida's "postsecular messianism"- perceived as part of a trend of "suspended' belief",<sup>133</sup> and therefore ineffective and apolitical- with Žižek's own 'religious turn' which is presented as active and radical. Žižek's depiction generalises and parodies Derrida's position and mistakenly conflates Levinas and Derrida.<sup>134</sup> Like Bradley, Žižek perceives an appeal to the transcendental in the later work, arguing that, "as Derrida himself has realized in the last two decades, the more radical a deconstruction is, the more it has to rely on its inherent undeconstructible condition of deconstruction, the messianic promise of justice."<sup>135</sup> As we have seen, the *différential* movements have remained consistent through Derrida's work, and any protective gesture to limit the incalculable element would disrupt the dynamism between the two movements, and "suture the opening of the call to justice."<sup>136</sup> The undeconstructible has always been both cause and effect of *différance*, whilst disrupting the idea of both. Similarly, as early as 'Différance', in which *différance* is 'unthinkable' in its juxtaposition of two different movements, and 'unnameable' by virtue of preceding and engendering the possibility of naming, Derrida is alert to the possibility of such terms being interpreted as evidence that *différance* is transcendent or divine. Concerning the description of *différance* as unnameable he maintains that: "The unnameable is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach: God for example. This unnameable is the play which makes possible nominal effects..."<sup>137</sup> Although I suspect that this is a point where Žižek would take issue with Derrida, perceiving in this structure the elevation of the unnameable to originary status, this would be to overlook the paradoxical role of the unnameable both as enabling naming and existing by virtue of naming, or in Žižek's terms,

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<sup>133</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 6.

<sup>134</sup> Žižek claims that 'Levinasian-Derridean Otherness' is: "...the very opposite of this gap in the One, of the inherent redoubling of the One- the assertion of Otherness leads to the boring, monstrous sameness of Otherness itself". Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 24. This directly contradicts Derrida's earlier account of *différance*: "The same, precisely, is *différance* as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same". Derrida, 'Différance', pp. 1-27 (p. 17).

<sup>135</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 139.

<sup>136</sup> Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298 (p. 257).

<sup>137</sup> Derrida, 'Différance', pp. 1-27 (p. 26).



“an effect of language.”<sup>138</sup> These two possibilities cannot be thought ‘presently’ together and this illustrates how deconstruction questions the presence of the present, with Derrida claiming in ‘Différance’ that “One cannot think the trace- and therefore, *différance* - on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present.”<sup>139</sup> The reason for this, as Derrida explains in ‘Différance’, is that the spatio-temporal is an effect of *différential* dispersion and consequently *différance* does not have a spatio-temporal origin; the idea of an origin is an effect rather than a cause of *différance*. Equally, the unnameable is a ‘non-originary origin’, seemingly both cause and effect whilst deracinating the logic of presence on which this depends. It is never presented as a transcendental supplement to the logic of deconstruction.

Bradley argues that “Derrida’s re-articulation of the political in terms of a messianic future or justice which remains to come (*l’à-venir*) is perhaps the defining gesture of his later work”.<sup>140</sup> It is this ‘to come’ which marks the divergence of both Bradley and Žižek from Derrida’s thought, however, whereas Bradley affirms “deconstruction’s resistance to demands for immediate political gratification”,<sup>141</sup> rejecting Derrida’s own late articulation of the political, Žižek doubts the importance of deconstruction at all for a practical politics.

Bradley’s perception of an ‘empirical deficit’ in Derrida’s later work is in part produced by what he sees as Derrida’s increased attachment to “an *absolute* past”<sup>142</sup> and “an absolute future”<sup>143</sup> at the expense of the actual historical instance. The latter term constitutes, for Bradley, the problem with Derrida’s ‘messianic, that is, it “risks *foreclosing* history as the site in which political invention must take place”,<sup>144</sup> and in effect, depoliticizes history. This term, on which Bradley’s thesis is grounded, is, I shall argue, a misrepresentation of the political thrust of Derrida’s ‘to come’. Derrida insists that we have a responsibility to “rigorously distinguish”<sup>145</sup> the ‘a-venir’ or ‘to come’ from the *avenir* as future, which, according to Derrida in ‘Force of Law’ “loses the openness”<sup>146</sup> and which, in offering a distinct horizon, is as much a limit as an opening. Considering the ‘to-come’ in temporal terms is misleading, it is not part of the future, nor is it infinitely deferred, a point

<sup>138</sup> Žižek. *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 70.

<sup>139</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27 (p. 21).

<sup>140</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-41 (p. 32).

<sup>141</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 33).

<sup>142</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 29).

<sup>143</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 35).

<sup>144</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 36).

<sup>145</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 230-298 (p. 256).

<sup>146</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 230-298 (p. 256).

which Derrida explicitly denies in *Rogues*, arguing that “democracy will never exist... not because it will be deferred but because it will always remain aporetic in its structure.”<sup>147</sup> This is due to the very structure of *différential* temporality as, “One cannot think the trace- and therefore, *différance* - on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present.”<sup>148</sup> This destabilizes Bradley’s rigid distinction between ‘absolute future’ and historical event and Žižek’s oversimplification that, for Derrida, “the act never happens” as “it is always deferred.”<sup>149</sup> Bradley’s critique of Derrida’s ‘absolute past’ also overlooks Derrida’s frequent invocation of the ‘it will have been’ of the future anterior, a tense which, used in order to avoid imposing the concept of presence onto the movement of the trace, reinforces the empiricity of temporality. Both Bradley and Žižek suggest that Derrida’s ‘messianic’ detracts from political urgency. However, terms such as undecidable, incalculable and impossible do not signify a foreclosure of political possibility, rather undecidability is the very *condition* of the decision, and impossibility demands that one “should force oneself to achieve it.”<sup>150</sup> As I demonstrated earlier, the incalculable element in the movement which constitutes deconstruction is unavoidably in dialogic relationship with the calculable element: “the infinite promise” is inseparable from “the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise”.<sup>151</sup> In his defence of Derrida against the critique of Stiegler and Beardsworth, Ben Roberts insists on the political urgency this structure creates, citing Derrida in ‘Force of Law’: “justice, however unrepresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait. To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required *immediately*, right away, as quickly as possible”.<sup>152</sup> This, in short, is the aporia of politics, and is what is meant by Derrida’s ‘impossibility’.

It is this aporia which Žižek hopes to escape in his own account of a ‘religious’ politics. In recent texts, Žižek argues that dialectical materialism and what he terms “the Christian experience”,<sup>153</sup> defined by its “perverse core”,<sup>154</sup> are mutually dependent. The contradictions which form this ‘core’ are exemplified by Godself, which, through the

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<sup>147</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 86.

<sup>148</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, 21-42 (p. 21).

<sup>149</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>150</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 74.

<sup>151</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 65.

<sup>152</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 230-298 (p. 255) and Roberts, (para. 32 of 37).

<sup>153</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 6.

<sup>154</sup> According to Žižek, this refers to a series of necessary and constitutive internal betrayals such as the way that Adam and Eve were lured into transgressing in order to be saved, or even more dramatically, Christ’s manipulation of Judas to bring about his own betrayal.

Incarnation, instantiates radical difference. “Christ,” Žižek asserts, is “the gap as such, the gap which simultaneously separates God from God and man from man,”<sup>155</sup> and with limitation and difference shifted from without to within God, the possibility of a transcendent God is removed: “Christ’s appearance itself effectively stands for God’s death.”<sup>156</sup> In *The Parallax View*, he even offers a definition of God in which he could almost be describing God as *différance*:

Perhaps ‘God’ is the name for this supreme split between the Absolute as the noumenal Thing and the Absolute as the appearance of itself, for the fact that the two are the same, that the difference between the two is purely formal.<sup>157</sup>

Žižek’s reclamation of Christianity is informed by Alain Badiou, who takes Saint Paul’s revolutionary adoption of “*the Christ-event*”<sup>158</sup> as one of the originary paradigms for his theory of the event and truth procedure. Žižek in turn, embraces not only Saint Paul’s political urgency, but the “Christ event” itself as the grounding of a transcendent God; he affirms: “there is nothing to wait for, we do not have to wait for the Event, for the arrival of the Messiah....”<sup>159</sup> and emphasises that in Christianity, everything is already revealed. The status of the Messiah is of course, one of the key distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. Žižek’s materialism enables him to reclaim the Christian event as something that has already happened leaving us with “an extreme urge to act.”<sup>160</sup> On the other hand, his rejection of the ethical and religious consequences with which *différance* is always bound in Derrida represents a denunciation of the Judaic structure in which the event is still to come or can never be historically completed.<sup>161</sup> For Žižek: “It is waiting for the Messiah which constrains us to the passive stance of, precisely, waiting, while the arrival functions as a signal which triggers activity.”<sup>162</sup> This reading clearly overlooks Derrida’s insistence that the ‘to’ of the ‘to come’ oscillates between the patient perhaps which merely awaits, and the performative, which urgently brings it about. And, as we have seen, the Derridean event

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<sup>155</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 24.

<sup>156</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 132.

<sup>157</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 109. Žižek’s definitions of God bear some resemblance to Derrida’s own rethinking of God; see, for example, Derrida, ‘Circumfession’.

<sup>158</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 47.

<sup>159</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 77.

<sup>160</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 137.

<sup>161</sup> In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, he dismisses the way “in which Judaism has become almost the hegemonic ethico-spiritual attitude of today’s intellectuals,” p.8.

<sup>162</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 137.

cannot be confined to what is perceived as a Judaic structure, with a conceivable and hoped-for event in the future.

Žižek claims that his reappraisal of Derrida aims “to draw an even stronger line of demarcation from the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects”<sup>163</sup> but what he actually tries to do is write off the later work under the guise of retrieving Derrida from these religious ‘suspects’. By opposing a parody of later Derrida as passive and ‘postpolitical’ to his own interpretation of Christianity (revealed, revolutionary and with St Paul as its figurehead), Žižek seeks to show just how radical and politically active his own work is. Aside from the publicity garnered by adopting such a high-profile target, Žižek insists on opposing himself to Derrida because the Derridean position is still perceived as a challenge to the thinking of ethics and politics. Derrida asserts:

there never was in the 1980s or 1990s, as has sometimes been claimed, a *political turn* or *ethical turn* in “deconstruction”, at least not as I experience it. The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking *of* the political, of the contour and limits of political, especially around the enigma or the autoimmune *double bind* of the democratic.<sup>164</sup>

Deconstruction thus questions the boundaries between theory and practice, and ethics and meta-ethics, with the infinite yet immanent movements of *différance* staging the shifting relationship between calculable and incalculable, ethical and political, and challenging the meaning of familiar terms such as ‘politics’ and ‘the political’.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, democracy can only be found “at the unstable and unlocatable border between law and justice, that is between the political and the ultrapolitical.”<sup>166</sup> Therefore, the ‘to-come’ which demands that one “should force oneself to achieve it”<sup>167</sup> can only be brought about by thinking through *différance*, as the relationship between ethics and politics is ultimately deconstructible. Yet this is something that Žižek, having read Derrida, already knows, admitting that “politics proper always involves a kind of short circuit between the Universal and the Particular.”<sup>168</sup> This seems to signify a short circuit in Žižek’s own work between

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<sup>163</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 11.

<sup>164</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 39.

<sup>165</sup> I shall discuss this further in Chapter Four and in the Conclusion.

<sup>166</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 39.

<sup>167</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 74.

<sup>168</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 64-5.

this deconstructive position and that of the “true dialectical materialist”<sup>169</sup> with “an extreme urge to act.”<sup>170</sup>

Whereas Žižek is frustrated by the deconstructive emphasis on the aporetic nature of politics, preferring the presence and prescriptions of dialectical materialism, Bradley is more ambivalent to deconstruction’s essential inability to ground a politics. Repeatedly acknowledging that deconstruction “cannot by definition form the basis of a political theory, programme or manifesto”,<sup>171</sup> Bradley nevertheless looks to assess the “operative value”<sup>172</sup> of Derrida’s thinking of the political. Siding with what he tentatively names “a new ‘materialist’ turn in deconstruction”,<sup>173</sup> he follows Stiegler in apparently privileging the technical and the empirical in the expression of the aporia. Here, his own frustration is remarkably like that of Žižek, and seems, despite his argument, to be directed at deconstruction’s resistance to forming a politics.

It is the dialogical relationship comprising deconstruction and forming the subject of this chapter which generates and sustains this resistance to a fixed politics and renders the work of deconstruction interminable. This dialogical relationship, known also as a double movement, “double strategy,”<sup>174</sup> or “double reading”<sup>175</sup> resists philosophical and political closure. In this, it marks a deviation from dialectic; as Derrida remarks in *Positions*: “If there were a definition of *différance*... it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *relève wherever* it operates.”<sup>176</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the structural consistency of these dialogical movements undermines any simplistic claims of a depoliticizing religious or theological turn in Derrida’s work. However, the earlier part of the chapter, in which I demonstrated the way in which

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<sup>169</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 6.

<sup>170</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 136.

<sup>171</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 33).

<sup>172</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 34).

<sup>173</sup> Bradley, ‘Derrida’s God’, 21-42 (p. 37).

<sup>174</sup> Robert Bernasconi, ‘The Trace of Levinas in Derrida’, in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 13-29 (p. 16).

<sup>175</sup> John Llewelyn, ‘Thresholds’, in *Derrida and Différance*, as above, pp. 51-62 (p. 61).

<sup>176</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 40-41. For a discussion of Derrida and dialectics see: Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: a critical articulation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

the discourses of dialogue and negative theology enable Derrida to rethink God through a non-logocentric writing also connects to the problematic relationship between the political and religious in Derrida's later work. In his earlier work, Arthur Bradley claimed:

If the *via negativa* has a meaningful contribution to make to any current debates on hospitality, then, it is not to sponsor this or that position, but to *uphold* the basic undecidability between the ethical and the political, to stop, in other words, the ethical from ossifying into the *merely* ethical and the political into the *merely* political.<sup>177</sup>

It is through his adoption of both the dialogical mode and apophatic gestures that Derrida reinforces this undecidability in 'Sauf le nom'. However, negative theology, so prevalent within the text, also raises a different tension, apparently internal to religion, between the private individual experience of faith or religion, often exemplified by the mystic or negative theologian, and its public, community, or institutional, counterpart; as Mary-Jane Rubenstein observes, the "separation of the mystical from the political echoes a common enough perception of the apophatic voyager".<sup>178</sup> By presenting negative theology as both a personal experience which interpellates the subject, and as a politically active mode which destabilises institutional dogma, Derrida goes some way to dispelling this one-sided view. He also begins to conceive of a non-totalising community or "gathering-together of singularities" (46) and a new way of approaching the political; as Arthur Bradley asserts, "what passes under the name of 'negative theology' might even provide the basis for a politics of decision-making that addresses *both* the conditional and the unconditional demands of justice".<sup>179</sup> Nevertheless, this tension between private and public, or singular and general, continues to resurface and is not resolved in 'Sauf le nom'. In Chapter Three, I shall examine how the discourse of silence enables Derrida to approach the question of 'God', and whether it provides a means of resolving this tension.

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<sup>177</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 212.

<sup>178</sup> Rubenstein, 195-211 (p. 202).

<sup>179</sup> Bradley, *Negative Theology*, p. 43.

## Chapter Three: Silence

We must find a speech which maintains silence.

Jacques Derrida

If I go further I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic: for silence is both of these. It is the demon's lure, and the more silent one keeps the more terrible the demon becomes; but silence is also divinity's communion with the individual.

Søren Kierkegaard

Even if I decide to be silent, even if I decide to promise nothing, not to commit myself to saying anything that would confirm once again the destination *of* speech, and the destination *to* speech, this silence still remains a modality of speech: a memory of promise and a promise of memory.

Jacques Derrida

### 1. Introduction

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida insisted that it was futile to search for an absolute beginning; rather, “We must begin *wherever we are*”,<sup>1</sup> already within signification, already implicated and entangled. Over twenty years later, with regard to the possibility of silence, Derrida reinforces this, writing: “It is no longer a question of not speaking. Even if one speaks so as not to say anything, even if an apophatic discourse deprives itself of meaning or of an object, it takes place. What initiated or made it possible *has taken place*”.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, absolute silence as impossible. Further, for Derrida, silence should not simply be regarded negatively, as “a cut, a suspension or interruption”,<sup>3</sup> a “mere ‘structural fault’ in the everlasting flow of noise”,<sup>4</sup> or, as George Kalamaras claims, “a ‘primitive’ and ‘prelogical’ condition of nihilism.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, silence figures as an expressive and communicative mode within discourse, a ‘linguistic silence’ which is a “modality of speech”<sup>6</sup> and a way of bearing witness.

In this chapter, I shall track the significance of this ‘linguistic silence’ as Derrida both discusses and employs it in the texts ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ and *The Gift of*

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-95, (p. 164).

<sup>3</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. by Stanley Godman (London: The Harvill Press, 1948), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> George Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 202.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 153).

*Death*. Reading ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, I shall argue that in this examination of apophatic procedures and gestures, Derrida assumes the apophatic mode of ‘avoiding speaking’, a way of preserving silence through language. I shall demonstrate that ‘Denials’ identifies various methodological similarities between deconstruction and negative theology, linking the discourses through their shared espousal of a linguistic or relativistic silence, whereby silence is perceived as a “modality of speech”,<sup>7</sup> and is that to which the text bears witness. This witnessing, I shall show, is described in terms of keeping or fulfilling a promise, a process or act which is directly related to Derrida’s reconception of divinity. Consequently, in this text, ‘God’ comes to name either the inherently promissory nature of language itself or the infinite movements of language as it relates to its exterior. Thus, for Derrida, keeping this promise through the preservation of linguistic silence is a way of retaining what Derrida understands by ‘God’, within language.

I shall contend that a similar structure can be perceived in *The Gift of Death*, in which bearing witness is enabled by an accretion of linguistic silences. Tracking the silences of Abraham, Kierkegaard and others through a palimpsestic account of the ‘Binding of Isaac’, Derrida describes how these silences point towards the state of being ‘in secret’, which names a structural indecipherability within language rather than a specific content. My account will show that, like the preservation of the promise, being ‘in secret’ entails bearing witness; both are inherently linguistic, and entail some kind of ethical, political or religious responsibility. Further, being ‘in secret’ names a singular responsibility, a process of “subjectivizing interiorization”<sup>8</sup> which calls the subject into being, and is also allied with the name of God. In the final part of the chapter I shall consider the tensions which come to light in these accounts of divinity and subjectivity. These tensions include those between the different accounts of God and between the singularity of religious commitment and the universality of ethics. The latter tension is to some extent resolved by Derrida’s adoption of a ‘double reading’, informed by the different perspectives of Genesis 22 held by Levinas and Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, I shall argue that Derrida doesn’t go far enough in designating his own reconfiguration of God and his inscription of a ‘post-writing’ as a practical response to the inescapably aporetic relationships between religion and ethics, and ethics and politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, trans. by Ken Frieden and Elizabeth Rottenberg in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 143-95 (p. 153).

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 13.



## 2. Reading 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials': Silence as a 'modality of speech'

Observing Derrida's adoption of juridical language in 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', David E. Klemm argues that "Derrida engages in a subtle parody of the apology or legal defense before the *deme* in ancient Greece",<sup>9</sup> as if having been charged with engaging in negative theology. As I have already briefly discussed, one element of Derrida's response to this 'charge' is to examine the relationship between deconstruction and apophaticism. As the second half of the text- an account of three paradigms of 'avoiding speaking'- particularly demonstrates, in contrast to 'Sauf le nom', 'Denials' here looks beyond negative theology to examine the linguistic strategies and modes of apophaticism, negativity and 'avoiding speaking' more broadly. In my analysis of the text, I shall focus on Derrida's concept of 'avoiding speaking', arguing that it adheres to the concept of linguistic or relative silence. As a way of maintaining silence within language, 'avoiding speaking' is also, I argue, a way of preserving the 'promise' in language, which names for Derrida, the inescapable relationship between God and language. In this way, deconstruction figures as a fourth paradigm of 'avoiding speaking', following its apophatic predecessor negative theology in the search for a discourse to discover, and speak of, what is understood by 'God'.

### (a) Silence as 'Avoiding Speaking'

Derrida's concept of 'avoiding speaking' can be broadly aligned with the understanding of silence not as absolute, invariant and opposed to speech, but as part of a continuum. Such a concept of silence, defined by Adam Jaworski as the relativistic view,<sup>10</sup> and espoused by other thinkers such as Rachel Muers, for whom "A 'silence' set in unmediated opposition to speech and other communicative activity... can rightly be criticized as ethically, politically,

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<sup>9</sup> David E. Klemm, 'Open Secrets: Derrida and Negative Theology', in *Negation and Theology*, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 8-24 (p. 19). For Klemm, Derrida "reduce[s] the charges to absurdity by showing that no one can write negative theology, because not even the negative theologians can write negative theology", Klemm, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), p. 43.

and theologically inadequate”,<sup>11</sup> contrasts with the traditional position, articulated by Max Picard, that “Speech is... opposed to silence”.<sup>12</sup>

Derrida’s contention that silence is ‘a modality of speech’ and his subsequent exploration of practices of ‘avoiding speaking’ can be understood as an attempt to fulfil his earlier imperative in ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve’ that “We must find a speech which maintains silence”,<sup>13</sup> and as a reaffirmation of his statement in ‘Force of Law’ that “There is here a silence walled up in the violent structure of the founding act; walled up, walled in because this silence is not exterior to language”.<sup>14</sup> Here, in ‘Denials’, self-consciously enacting familiar apophatic gestures, he considers what ‘avoiding speaking’ might be:

‘Comment ne pas dire?’ can mean: how to be silent, how not to speak in general, how to say nothing, how to avoid speaking; but it can also mean: how, in speaking, not to say this or that, in such and such a way, which is both transitive and modalized? In other words: how, in saying and speaking, to avoid this or that discursive, logical, rhetorical mode? How to avoid a particular predicate, and even predication itself? For example: how to avoid a negative form, or how not to be negative? How to say something finally? Which comes back to the apparently reverse question: how to say, how to speak? Between the two interpretations of ‘Comment ne pas dire?’ the meaning of the uneasiness thus seems to get reversed: from ‘How to be silent?’ (How to avoid speaking at all?) one passes)- moreover, in a completely necessary way and as if from within- to the question, which can always become the prescriptive heading of a recommendation: How not to speak, what words to avoid, in order to speak *well*? *How to avoid speaking* is thus at once or successively: how is it necessary not to speak, and so on. The ‘how’ always shelters a ‘why’, and the ‘it is necessary’ has the double value of a ‘should’ or ‘ought’ and a ‘must’.<sup>15</sup>

‘Avoiding speaking’ can therefore signify both absolute and relative silence. Derrida’s reference here to speaking ‘well’ suggests that there may be ethical, religious or political

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel Muers, *Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 15. See also Kalamaras and Franke, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Picard, p. 27. Other adherents of this position include Peter Bien who claims that “language sounds as an impediment whereas silence is a perfect ritualistic means to renew our connection with true reality”, and Bernard P. Dauenhauer who looks to reverse the familiar prioritising of speech over silence, asserting: “There is no good reason for assigning language ontological priority over silence”, see Peter Bien, *Words, Wordlessness and the Word: Silence Reconsidered from a Literary Point of View* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992), p. 20, and Dauenhauer, p. 106. For a different perspective on the differences between relative and absolute, and linguistic and non-linguistic silence, see Stefan Hertmans, ‘A hole in speech’, trans. by Peter Vosch in *Wordlessness*, ed. by Bart Verschaffel and Mark Verminck (Dublin: Lillipt, 1993), pp. 25-35.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2003), pp 317-50, (p. 332).

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 230-298 (p. 242).

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 154).

implications to the choices surrounding linguistic expression. Indeed, the complexity and ambiguity of the apophatic gestures Derrida follows is underlined by Mark Taylor's discussion of the problems created by translating even the title of the text 'Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations'. Taylor explains:

The duplicity of the title is repeated in the single word that serves as the subtitle of the essay: *dénégations*. At this point, translation becomes impossible. *Dénégation* is the word the French translators of Freud use for the German *Verneinung*. There is already a certain duplicity in *Verneinung*. The prefix *ver-* can mean: removal, loss, stoppage, reversal, opposite, using up, expenditure, continuation to the end, alteration. *Ver-nein-ung*, then, suggests both the presence and absence of negation, both the continuation and end of the not. The complexity of *Verneinung* is not captured in the standard English translation of Freud's term as 'negation'. Difficulties are compounded by the choice of 'Denials', for the English translation of Derrida's *dénégations*. 'Denial' is one of the English words (the other is 'disavowal') used to translate Freud's *Verleugnung*. Though closely associated, *Verneinung* and *Verleugnung* are not equivalent. To translate *dénégations* by denials is, therefore, a mistranslation. However to translate *dénégations* 'properly' by way of *Verneinung* by *negations* would also be a mistranslation. Moreover, the 'proper' translation would be more misleading than the 'mistranslation'. Here, as elsewhere, mistranslation, it seems, is unavoidable.

*Dénégations* captures the irresolvable duplicity of *Verneinung* in which affirmation and negation are conjoined without being united or synthesized. *Verneinung* is an affirmation that is a negation and a negation that is an affirmation. To de-negate is to un-negate; but un-negation is itself a form of negation. More precisely, denegation is an un-negation that affirms rather than negates negation. The affirmation of negation by way of denegation subverts the dialectical affirmation of negation by way of the negation of negation. To think or rethink negative theology with Derrida, it is necessary to think the negative undialectically by thinking a negative that is *neither* both negation and affirmation *nor* either negation or affirmation.<sup>16</sup>

Derrida's use of the term *dénégation* both stresses the impossibility of a dialectical resolution to the movements of negative theology, and underlines the fact that the "silent union with the ineffable"<sup>17</sup> towards which negative theology strives is always constructed through language itself, through the layers of negation and affirmation which Derrida himself adopts. As such, both deconstruction and negative theology name heterogeneous and interminable processes; both, as we saw in the last chapter, are inescapably dialogical. Here, for example, negative theology incorporates "a massive and indistinct multiplicity of

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Taylor, *Notes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 150).

possibles”.<sup>18</sup> Despite negative theology’s aim to transcend the linguistic strategies through which it proceeds, “it cannot contain within itself the principle of its interruption. It can only indefinitely postpone the encounter with its own limit”, and is consequently, and paradoxically, “Alien, heterogeneous... to this experience of the ineffable and the mute vision that seems to orient this apophatic”.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, in practice, ‘avoiding speaking’ refers not to an absolute silence but to a linguistic silence which always looks to transcend its own limitations. This is, therefore, a sort of dialogical silence.

Derrida’s vehement and repeated rejection of dialectical resolutions in ‘Denials’ is a consequence of his perception that dialectic homogenizes difference,<sup>20</sup> and his assertion instead, of a dialogue which thinks beyond dialectic, of a deconstructive double movement which preserves rather than suppresses contradiction, and of “a trace whose affirmation is not symmetrical”.<sup>21</sup> In Derrida’s discussion of apophaticism, dialogue and silence are always intertwined. In fact, the dialogical movements discussed in the last chapter are clearly evident within ‘Denials’, first in Derrida’s discussion of the Platonic khōra, which, Derrida describes, is depicted according to two concurrent, conflicting and dialogical languages. The first of these incorporates khōra within the Platonic system using metaphors and negations, whereas the second is more interruptive, locating khōra as an “an irreducible spacing”,<sup>22</sup> an unknowable silence, within the Platonic system.

An even more explicit example of this relationship between dialogue and silence is provided by Derrida’s discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius. Derrida claims that “the theologian must practice, not a double language, but the double inscription of his knowledge”, and thus that “Dionysius evokes a dual tradition, a dual mode of transmission (*dittēn paradosin*)” which is on one hand “ineffable, secret, prohibited, reserved, inaccessible (*aporrhēton*)” and on the other “philosophical, demonstrative (*apodeiktikēn*)”. These two languages intersect and at this point, each language “bears the silence of the other”,<sup>23</sup> with the inexpressible intersecting the expressible. Here, again, silence refers to something which is expressed, or insists, within language. The double or dialogical mode is also evident in Derrida’s own

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 151).

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 150).

<sup>20</sup> For examples of such rejections, see Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 144), (p. 163) and (p. 167).

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 156).

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 172).

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 162).

divided approach to the text which is presented both as a philosophical and pedagogical tract and as the performative fulfilment of a promise.<sup>24</sup>

### (b) Language and the Promise

For Derrida, these strategies of linguistic silence or ‘avoiding speaking’ provide an opportunity to fulfil his promise that, “one day I will stop deferring, one day I will try to explain myself directly on this subject, and at last speak of ‘negative theology’ *itself*, assuming that some such thing exists.”<sup>25</sup> The fulfilment of this promise, however, is repeatedly deferred, and twenty three pages into the essay, Derrida states: “We are still on the threshold”.<sup>26</sup> This apparent evasion is however, a consequence of the nature of the promise, which can never be fulfilled in the present tense. Derrida explains:

Will I do it? Am I in Jerusalem? This is a question to which one will never respond in the present tense, only in the future or in the past anterior.

Why insist on this postponement? Because it appears to me neither avoidable nor insignificant. One can never decide whether it does not give rise, as postponement, to the very thing it defers. It is not certain that I will keep my promise today; but nor is it certain that in further delaying its fulfilment, I have not, nevertheless, already kept it.<sup>27</sup>

The impossibility of responding wholly within the present refers to both the grammar of biblical Hebrew, which “does not employ a present-tense form of the verb *to be*”,<sup>28</sup> and to deconstructive temporality which reminds us that: “One cannot think the trace- and therefore, *différance*- on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present”.<sup>29</sup> When Derrida speaks of the promise, he integrates the familiar understanding of a promise, as a pledge, vow or assurance, with another understanding of it as a state of being, akin, as we

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<sup>24</sup> The ‘double movement’ also figures in ‘Denials’ in the form of the apostrophe, as Derrida speaks of that which “*turns* the discourse *away* in the *same* direction”, Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 182). This is illuminated by Sinaro Kamboureli’s discussion of the apostrophe: “the rhetorical figure of the sacred is that of apostrophe... Apostrophe in Greek, however, means something more than simply addressing someone. Apostrophe also means to avert one’s face from someone or something, to turn away. This turn, this rhetorical trope, seems to sum up what is unsummable. Unreadability: turning toward and away from divine locution”, Sinaro Kamboureli, ‘St. Teresa’s Jouissance: Toward a Rhetoric of Reading the Sacred’, in *Silence, the Word and the Sacred*, ed. by E. D. Blodgett and H. G. Coward (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), pp. 51-65 (p. 62).

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 151).

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 164).

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 152).

<sup>28</sup> Ken Frieden in Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, trans. by Ken Frieden in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 73-142 (p. 134). Footnote not found in later translation.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 1-27, (p. 21).

shall see, to being 'in secret'. Here he declares: "I will speak of a promise but also within the promise".<sup>30</sup> Speaking 'within the promise' entails acknowledging and responding to the promissory nature of language, whose temporal and significatory structures ensure that meaning cannot be fully realised in the present, rather signification always gestures "toward a past *and* toward a future that are still unrepresentable".<sup>31</sup> This guarantees that the full significance of an event is never presently realised as its disclosure is dependent on both past and future. Consequently, the promise, which, paradoxically, "must be made in the present",<sup>32</sup> is 'kept' or preserved by acknowledging its structure of non-closure and rejecting attempts at present realisation. In this sense, Derrida's endorsement of linguistic or relativistic silence, of a mode of 'avoiding speaking' through language, acknowledges and responds to the promissory nature of language.

Derrida's discussion of the promise is often topological and links the promise to the event, even, "the event of the event, history, the thinking of an essential 'having-taken-place', of a revelation, of an order, and a promise".<sup>33</sup> This spatial focus reiterates a familiar association between silence and the creation of space, illustrated by scholars such as Rachel Muers,<sup>34</sup> George Kalamaras,<sup>35</sup> Cheryl Glenn,<sup>36</sup> and Stefan Hertmans.<sup>37</sup> Reasserting his interest in linguistic or relative, rather than absolute silence, Derrida insists that the question of 'how to avoid speaking' is "the question of place as place of writing, of inscription, of the trace",<sup>38</sup> a point underlined by Hent de Vries, for whom 'Denials', "is just as much a treatise on *place*- that is to say on the trope, the topos, topology- as an inquiry into the specifically linguistic problem of ineffability".<sup>39</sup> Through the figure of the promise, the text connects 'avoiding speaking', topology, and even divinity.

'Avoiding speaking' and remaining 'within the promise' are inherently linguistic actions, however, it is clear from Derrida's experimentation with language and his, here disparaged, urge "to experience speech",<sup>40</sup> that he perceives the wider effects of such actions. He asserts this explicitly later in the text, revealing: "I am not certain that only rhetoric is at

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 153).

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 150).

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 153).

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 175).

<sup>34</sup> "To fall silent is, after all, to create a space...", Muers, p. 149.

<sup>35</sup> "Silence is a condition of emptiness", Kalamaras, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Silence [is]... a space that draws us forth", Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 160.

<sup>37</sup> "Silence as a space in which history can reflect on itself", Hertmans, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143-195 (p. 168).

<sup>39</sup> De Vries, p. 94.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, 'Denials', pp. 143- 195 (p. 145).

stake”,<sup>41</sup> and presenting non-disclosure through ‘avoiding speaking’ and the promise as an ethical imperative “to protect access to a knowledge that remains *in itself* inaccessible, untransmissible, unteachable”.<sup>42</sup> Not only is there an ethical imperative in ‘avoiding speaking’, Derrida also links this linguistic silence and his understanding of the promise to his re-conception of the figure of ‘God’.

### (c) Silence as a ‘distinctively religious sign’?: Rewriting God

The association between silence and religion or God is long-standing, however recent theologians and religious thinkers have tried to rethink this connection in contemporary terms. Such thinkers include Oliver Davies and Rachel Muers who, like Derrida, adopt a relativistic approach to silence, reframing it as dialogical, generative and internal to language. For Davies, silence, a “distinctively religious sign”,<sup>43</sup> is “the primordial and generative ground”,<sup>44</sup> and he emphasises communication between God and creation, claiming that Christianity “necessarily promotes a metaphysics and linguistics of address”.<sup>45</sup> Within this framework, Davies depicts silence as “the *possibility* of discourse and utterance, and with that, the possibility of a new way of speaking and of understanding the world”.<sup>46</sup> Following Derrida, he maintains that more than language is at stake, and that understanding and employing silence equips both the individual and the community to listen to the ‘other’.

Again insisting that silence is both relative and dialogical, Rachel Muers asserts that silence is “the best communicative ‘likeness’ for the God who transcends all the distinctions between created things”.<sup>47</sup> Perceiving a dynamic relationship between speaking and listening, and informed by both Eberhard Jungel’s “theological reaffirmation of God as the one who constitutes the world by speaking”<sup>48</sup> and Nelle Morton’s suggestion that God “hears us to speech”,<sup>49</sup> Muers advocates ‘keeping God’s silence’. This would refer to an active, open, and interruptive silence which acknowledges and enables the “irreducible otherness

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 193).

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143- 195 (p. 161).

<sup>43</sup> Oliver Davies, ‘Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence’, in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, as before, pp. 201-222 (p. 202).

<sup>44</sup> Davies, ‘Soundings’, pp. 201-222 (p. 203).

<sup>45</sup> Davies, ‘Soundings’, pp. 201-222 (p. 210).

<sup>46</sup> Davies, ‘Soundings’, pp. 201-222 (p. 222).

<sup>47</sup> Muers, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Muers, p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> Muers, p. 51.

of the other”.<sup>50</sup> Endorsing Derrida’s dictum that “tout autre est tout autre”,<sup>51</sup> Muers suggests that silence makes it impossible to distinguish the other as God from the human other. In Chapter Two, I asked what it might mean for Derrida to ‘save the name’ of God. Here, in light of the clear parallels between theological approaches and deconstructive approaches to ‘avoiding speaking’ or being silent, I shall explore whether Derrida may be looking to ‘keep God’s silence’.

I have already shown that, as Hent de Vries attests, the gestures of negative theology ‘reveal the most significant modalities of language, meaning and reference “as such”’, and that the preoccupation with the structures, possibilities and limits of language, and the adoption of ‘avoiding speaking’ are key similarities between the second-order discourses of negative theology and deconstruction. In ‘Denials’, Derrida uses such apophatic gestures in order to speak of God and the name of God. However, looking to challenge accepted notions of ‘God’ and to re-think ‘God’, Derrida’s use of the apophatic mode seems to find him frustrated, as it ensures that the name ‘God’ remains recuperable by theology. Here he acknowledges that even when he uses the name ‘God’ to refer to a specific state or function of language, his citation immediately becomes an invocation; he asks: “I do not say God, but how to avoid saying God here, from the moment that I say the name of God?”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, his attempt to speak of the ‘name of God’ rather than ‘God’, and to separate the two by means of the apophatic mode,<sup>53</sup> is thwarted, as the ‘name of God’ always remains haunted by theological conceptions of ‘God’.

However, given the fact that all language is haunted by ‘God’, or “the becoming-theological of all discourse”,<sup>54</sup> Derrida chooses to adopt apophatic discourse in order to employ its potential for subversion and suspension, and its cultivation of a space in which the nature and significance of ‘God’ is not already assumed. Derrida suggests that apophatic discourse may lead to the association of all negativity with God,<sup>55</sup> and tracks the connection between God and language, stating that God names “the trace of the singular event that will have made speech possible...”<sup>56</sup> and that “language has begun without us, in us, before us.

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<sup>50</sup> Muers, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143–195 (p. 163).

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143–195 (p. 146).

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143–195 (p. 145).

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143–195 (p. 146).

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143–195 (p. 165).



This is what theology calls God”.<sup>57</sup> Speaking of the inevitable possibility of the “ontotheological reappropriation” of language and meaning, he insists that “this question remains at the heart of a thinking of difference or of a writing of writing”.<sup>58</sup> In ‘Denials’ Derrida repeatedly reminds us that language is suffused with theology, and, in foregrounding these issues, looks not to eliminate the question of God- to his mind, impossible- but to respond to it otherwise and, following the apophatic precedent, to reject the “subtle or perverse idolatry”<sup>59</sup> of ontotheology in favour of other conceptions of God. Here God becomes nothing other than the trace within language which renders language and signification both possible and impossible, as well as a name for the historical relationship between name and referent, and, most importantly, the inescapably promissory nature of language itself. Derrida follows negative theology in its use of ‘avoiding speaking’ in order to fulfil, or at least retain, a certain promise,<sup>60</sup> and in endowing this promise- which is always found within language- with a sense of religious or ethical responsibility. He repeatedly speaks of his commitment, and, both following and deviating from negative theology, links this promise to God, insisting that it “inscribes us with its trace in language- before language”.<sup>61</sup> For both discourses, ‘avoiding speaking’ and the retention of the promise, provide a way of, in Muers’ terms, ‘keeping God’s silence’.

Negative theology and the language of the promise go some way to enabling Derrida to find a non-ontotheological discourse through which to speak about God, a discourse which, in ‘Sauf le nom’, he speaks of as “post-writing”.<sup>62</sup> Here this is signalled by his assertion that “The promise of which I will speak will have always escaped this demand for presence”,<sup>63</sup> his claim that negative theology “deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism”,<sup>64</sup> and his reiteration that, for deconstruction, “X (for example, the text, writing, the trace, *différance*...)... calls for another syntax... It is written completely otherwise”.<sup>65</sup> Such a language, echoing ‘post-writing’, and what Marius Timmann Mjaaland refers to as an

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 166).

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 148).

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 158).

<sup>60</sup> He asserts that “The experience of negative theology perhaps holds *to* a promise”, Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 153).

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 153).

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom’, pp. 33-85 (p. 53).

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 153).

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 148).

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 144).

“alternative *logos*”,<sup>66</sup> would, however, reject negative theology’s capitulation to “the authority of the noun or the name [*nom*]”,<sup>67</sup> turning instead to the conception of naming offered by Plato’s *khōra*, “not a question of a proper name, but rather of appellation, a way of addressing oneself”,<sup>68</sup> a mode of naming which challenges the self-identity and sovereignty of the bearer of the name.

In light of the numerous similarities between negative theology and deconstruction, and the fact that, even in its differences from deconstruction, it remains faithful to a seemingly deconstructive dialogical or double mode, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the two discourses. Oliver Davies explains:

Indeed, his [Derrida’s] view that it is only the intentionality of the speaker which divides deconstruction and Christian apophatic theology may already contain a tacit admission that he now finds himself situated on a ground which is defined as much by the theological object of his critique as it is by his deconstructionist reflections upon it.<sup>69</sup>

Within ‘Denials’, Derrida both emphasises the differences between the discourses, notably negative theology’s residual attachment to “some superessentiality, a being beyond being”,<sup>70</sup> and the seeming insignificance of such discrepancies, revealing:

But since the structure of the trace is in general the very possibility of an experience of finitude, the distinction between a finite cause and an infinite cause of the trace appears- let us venture to say- secondary here.<sup>71</sup>

It is perhaps the status of both negative theology and deconstruction as second-order discourses which makes it impossible to demarcate a clear distinction between the two.

Merold Westphal argues that “Deconstruction is not able and does not try to settle the question of the reality of God”,<sup>72</sup> and thus, in an important sense, Derrida’s texts remain inescapably agnostic. However, in another sense, deconstruction accounts for God, rendering traditional accounts of God unnecessary explanations for both the insufficiency and excess of language. As Rowan Williams recognises: “For Derrida himself, it is

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<sup>66</sup> Mjaaland, p. 323.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 147).

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 173-4).

<sup>69</sup> Davies, ‘Soundings’, p. 207.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 147).

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, ‘Denials’, pp. 143-195 (p. 166).

<sup>72</sup> Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 105.

reasonably clear that 'God' is an 'effect of the trace': to speak of God is to try to put a face upon that which haunts language- what is over the shoulder, round the corner, what is by stipulation not capable of being confronted, being *faced*'.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, in 'Denials' itself, he restates his, now famous, claim from 'The Supplement of Origin' that "*infinite* differance *is finite*",<sup>74</sup> which implies that the trace cannot be understood as 'God' as the latter is perceived in any orthodox sense. These two seemingly contradictory positions can, once again, be perceived as part of a double reading or movement, in which neither position is wholly endorsed or discounted.

In 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', Derrida reinscribes the gestures of negative theology within the boundaries of deconstructive discourse, reinforcing the connection between God and language and therefore, the need to find the right mode of language or silence to speak of God. He both suspends the question of the external reality of 'God' as traditionally perceived, and rewrites God, through the mode of linguistic silence or 'avoiding speaking' he learns from negative theology, as an otherness or promise which remains internal to language itself. In my forthcoming analysis of *The Gift of Death*, I shall observe the same action of 'avoiding speaking' in order to preserve an element of otherness, or 'secret', which is equivalent to the promise in 'Denials'. Such a 'promise' or 'secret' is again commensurate with Derrida's conception of a structural or linguistic God.

### **3. Reading *The Gift of Death*: Silence, Secrecy and Responsibility**

Like 'Denials', Derrida's 1995 text *The Gift of Death* also approaches the problem of how unspeakable and unhistoricisable elements may be expressed, or rather witnessed, within language. Drawing on Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the History of Philosophy*, Derrida acknowledges the tensions inherent in writing a history of responsibility, figuring responsibility as singular, subjectifying and interruptive, and therefore antithetical to the consistent, homogenising narratives of history. The history of religion, he declares, is such a history of responsibility, in effect a history of suppressing, sublating or silencing the excessive events which found and sustain it; a history of secrecy. Derrida tracks Patočka's

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<sup>73</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Hegel and the gods of postmodernity', in *Shadow of Spirit*, as before, pp. 72-80 (p. 73).

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Supplement of Origin', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 88-104 (p. 102).

genealogy of this process: the replacement of the “orgiastic sacred”<sup>75</sup> by Platonism, which in turn, is substituted for Christianity through the processes of incorporation and repression. Derrida explains: “religion exists once the secret of the sacred, orgiastic or demonic mystery has been, if not destroyed, at least integrated, and finally subjected to the sphere of responsibility” (2). For both Patočka and Derrida, such a process, which represses rather than destroys its impossible, aporetic history, problematises responsibility. Christianity, for Derrida, synonymous with responsibility, and whose history comprises incidences of responsibility, is secretly influenced by Platonic rationalism and thus becomes separated from responsibility. Consequently, it “doesn’t thematize what a responsible person *is*, that is, what he *must be*” (25). Whereas for Patočka, this is a temporary schism,<sup>76</sup> Derrida, on the other hand, perceives Christianity’s relationship with responsibility as inescapably aporetic, rather than an historical problem to be solved.

As an instantiation of the tension between the singularity of responsibility, and the universality of historical narrative, in the central chapter of *The Gift of Death*, Derrida turns to Genesis 22 and its narrative of the ‘Binding of Isaac’. Interweaving elements of Kierkegaard’s account in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida explores the role of silence in this narrative in order to investigate the relationships between individual subjectivity and responsibility, and religion and ethics, as well as the nature and significance of both faith and ‘God’. In my reading of *The Gift of Death*, I shall focus on the function of silence in the text’s central chapter, arguing that it is again a linguistic or relativistic silence, and showing how Derrida emphasises and adds to the layers of silence in the narrative, preserving them within the text. Next I shall demonstrate that this act of ‘keeping silent’ is inescapably linked to what Derrida terms, being ‘in secret’, a linguistic mode of bearing witness which performs an ethical, political or religious responsibility. I argue that this process of being ‘in secret’ or retaining linguistic silence, is inseparable from Derrida’s formulation of a linguistic God, before turning to the tensions created by this formulation.

### **(a) The ‘Binding of Isaac’: Narratives of Silence**

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<sup>75</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 2. Further references will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>76</sup> This is illustrated by Patočka’s claim that “What has not yet come about is the fulfilment, within history and in political history, and first and foremost in European politics, of the new responsibility announced by the *mysterium tremendum*”, Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 28.

As in 'Denials', which depicts silence as a 'modality of speech', in *The Gift of Death* Derrida focuses on the partial, inflected and linguistic silences which emerge within the competing, clamorous voices of different histories and narratives. Michael Caspi and Sascha Cohen identify "a silencing of all feeling, silencing of emotions..."<sup>77</sup> within the narrative of Genesis 22, and Derrida draws attention to the silences of Abraham, Isaac, God, Sarah<sup>78</sup> and the ram to be sacrificed,<sup>79</sup> as well as written silences in Kierkegaard's account in *Fear and Trembling* and within *The Gift of Death* itself.<sup>80</sup> Here I shall focus on the limited, linguistic silences of Abraham and God, arguing that in *The Gift of Death* Derrida upholds these silences, and adopts them as a model for keeping silent in other areas.

Recalling Kierkegaard's account of Genesis 22 in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida notes its accretion of silences and narrative layers, asserting: "God keeps silent about his reasons. Abraham does also, and the book is not signed by Kierkegaard but by Johannes de Silentio".<sup>81</sup> Derrida looks to rethink what silence might mean in this context, and is inspired by Abraham- rendered by Kierkegaard into "an unreadable text"-<sup>82</sup> and by Abraham's selective silence. As Abraham and Isaac ascend Mount Moriah, Abraham continues to speak to Isaac without either lying or revealing his plan; his words are elliptical. Derrida recounts Abraham's reaction when Isaac questions the whereabouts of the lamb to be sacrificed:

It can't be said that Abraham doesn't respond to him. He says God will provide. God will provide a lamb for the holocaust ([ "burnt offering" ] Genesis 22: 8). Abraham thus keeps his secret at the same time as he replies to Isaac. He doesn't keep silent and he doesn't lie. He doesn't speak nontruth. (59)

This selective silence permeates Abraham's speech; Derrida continues, "But even if he says everything, he need only keep silent on a single thing for one to conclude that he hasn't spoken. Such a silence takes over his whole discourse" (59). This is further theorised as "a

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Maswari Caspi and Sascha Benjamin Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam: The Lambs of God* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1995), p. 46.

<sup>78</sup> Following Derrida, John D. Caputo undertakes a feminist retelling under the name of Johanna de Silentio, "reading it as a story of the end of sacrifice, rather than of how much steely male machismo it takes to be willing to spill blood in the name of God", Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 144.

<sup>79</sup> Again following Derrida, Caputo picks up on the ram as another silenced figure, claiming: "the ram was a way of deflecting attention from the man, of putting the blame for the man's injustice on an animal with soft, innocent eyes", Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 140.

<sup>80</sup> Derrida also remarks on the silence of the body, incorporating both biological and phenomenological language in order to try and answer the question: "What does the body mean to say by trembling or crying, presuming one can speak here of the body, or of saying, of meaning, and of rhetoric?" The trembling is henceforth presented as a response to the *mysterium tremendum*, the dissymmetrical encounter with God. See *The Gift of Death*, p. 55.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 58. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>82</sup> Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard, Language and the Reality of God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 131.

sort of sublime irony. Speaking in order to not say anything or to say something other than what one thinks, speaking in such a way as to intrigue, disconcert, question, or have someone or something else speak (the law, the lawyer), means speaking ironically” (76).<sup>83</sup> This irony, which entails holding more than one perspective simultaneously, recalls the ‘double reading’ or dialogical approach of deconstruction which I discussed in the previous chapter. For Derrida, dialogue and silence necessarily complement one another; whilst one linguistic voice is expressive, others are temporarily suspended, yet remain implicit in, or assumed by, the speaking voice.

Abraham’s silence is presented as a necessary response to his singular responsibility which cannot be communicated through the generality of language. However, whereas Kierkegaard interprets the silence as Abraham “speaking in a strange tongue”<sup>84</sup> as “he speaks no human language” (74), Derrida suggests that it represents the innate strangeness of the mother tongue, the conjunction of the singular subject with the universality of language. Abraham’s silence therefore invites us to consider what is meant by singularity, responsibility and subjectivity. In contrast to Abraham’s distinctly human silence, God’s silence is regarded as a sign of ‘his’ divinity, and provides, according to Derrida, a way to rethink what divinity might mean. Derrida describes:

God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed. God doesn’t give his reasons, he acts as he intends, he doesn’t have to give his reasons or share anything with us: neither his motivations, if he has any, nor his deliberations, nor his decisions. Otherwise he wouldn’t be God, we wouldn’t be dealing with the Other as God or with God as wholly other [tout autre]. If the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn’t be the other, we would share a type of homogeneity. Discourse also partakes of that sameness... (57)

Derrida’s assessment of the significance of God’s silence influences the various definitions of God which appear in *The Gift of Death*. God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, offering no explanation, and remaining silent as they ascend Mount Moriah. God’s silence is only broken when Abraham lifts the knife to kill his son and God halts him with the words: “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me (Genesis 22:12)”

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<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of Derrida’s use of irony, see Claire Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 266.

<sup>84</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin republished 1985), p. 119.

(71). Derrida considers different interpretations of the silence which precedes this: first, that it is an effect of God's divinity, that the gap between God and creation is insuperable and God remains silent because he is incomprehensible, or secondly, that God's silence reinforces or even generates this gap between God and humanity, enforcing God's mastery and absolute authority by leaving Abraham in fear and ignorance. This is expressed both as the tyrannical mastery of an Old Testament deity and, more mercifully, as testament to a dynamic relationship between God and creation. Here Derrida rewrites God's demand as a loving prayer, reflecting his own weakness and humility:

The command requests, like a prayer from a God, a declaration of love that implores: tell me that you love me, tell me that you turn towards me, towards the unique one, towards the other as unique and, above all, over everything else, unconditionally, and in order to do that, make a gift of death, give death to your only son and give me the death I ask for, that I give to you by asking for it. (72)

This interpretation of God's silence situates it within a linguistic framework, as the relativistic silence which Adam Jaworski describes and Derrida explores in 'Denials'. In suggesting limitations to God's power, this understanding of silence also gestures towards a more radical understanding of God. The structures of linguistic silence and secrecy form the basis of Derrida's understanding of a non-sovereign, post-ontotheological God, with *The Gift of Death* juxtaposing this vision of God with the transcendent God of Genesis 22.

Considering the relationship between silence and the figure of God both in Genesis 22 and in Kierkegaard's retelling, Steven Shakespeare suggests that silence becomes "a context for becoming aware of God".<sup>85</sup> Kierkegaard's account in *Fear and Trembling* emphasises and develops the accumulation of silence within the narrative, with his adoption of a pseudonym contributing towards this process of keeping silent; Derrida considers: "This pseudonym keeps silent, it expresses the silence that is kept. Like all pseudonyms, it seems destined to keep secret the real name *as* patronym, that is, the name of the father of the work" (58). In highlighting the role and responsibilities of the father, this denial of the patronym indicates a shift in interpretation of the narrative, with Kierkegaard focusing not on Isaac's silence, but that of Abraham.<sup>86</sup> Derrida is drawn to Kierkegaard's layering of narrative and silence, and the possibility of preserving secrets within the text. Jerome

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<sup>85</sup> Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard*, p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> Jerome Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 52.

Gellman notes the critical consensus “that Kierkegaard’s work is best understood as comprised of layers of meaning, where each lower layer illuminates those above it”,<sup>87</sup> an approach which leaves critics searching for a “hidden message”,<sup>88</sup> be it about Kierkegaard’s former fiancée Regine or his relationship with his father. Shakespeare similarly emphasises the importance of narrative form and linguistic silence in *Fear and Trembling*, perceiving:

It is able to communicate without translating the absurd, secretive faith of Abraham into a determinate content. The narrative is open-ended, or rather, it cannot constitute a seamless whole which is self-evident or self-interpreting. It contains within itself a paradox which resists any narration, but which requires a narrative context to appear as such (and here ‘to appear as such’ means precisely not to be made manifest or intelligible, but to be respected in its hiddenness and paradoxicality).<sup>89</sup>

Here, Shakespeare stresses the importance of a language of silence as that which can communicate something other than ‘determinate content’ and which doesn’t forcibly translate the singular into the general. It is this feature which accounts for Derrida’s adoption of the discourse of relative or linguistic silence, as it doesn’t demand complete manifestation, and can therefore support a structure of secrecy. I shall now examine how, for Derrida, this silence enables secrecy, and, in turn, the processes of bearing witness and becoming responsible.

**(b) ‘Can one witness in silence? By silence?’: Secrecy, Bearing Witness and Responsibility**

Recalling his description of being ‘within the promise’, in ‘Denials’, Derrida describes Abraham as being “in secret” (79). This contrasts with the idea of keeping a specific secret, particularly as here there is a double structure of secrecy, both between God and Abraham, and Abraham and his family. The effect is a simultaneous binding and separation, with Abraham “cut off from both man and from God” (79) yet affirming his commitment to God. In Derrida’s understanding of secrecy, there is no clearly defined content to be withheld or disclosed; it consists in a state of being rather than the transmission of knowledge or information. Whereas keeping a secret puts one in a position of power, being ‘in secret’ puts

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<sup>87</sup> Gellman, p. 44.

<sup>88</sup> Gellman, p. 43.

<sup>89</sup> Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard*, p. 133.



one in service of, or subject to, another. In being denied comprehensive knowledge of his situation, Abraham is rendered powerless; he must continue “without knowing why yet keeping it a secret” (72). However, Abraham’s powerlessness, his subjection, is also framed as subjectivization. He is called to a singular task which only he can fulfil, and this separates him from the language and objectives of his community, and renders him, as Kierkegaard’s ‘Knight of Faith’, incomprehensible to the people around him. Derrida terms this process, necessitated by the demands of secrecy, “subjectivizing interiorization” (13), as it calls the subject into being. As I shall go on to discuss, this process foregrounds the privileged relationship between the subject and God, as well as calling into question what these terms might mean. Consequently, *The Gift of Death* attests to “the affinity between the sacred and secrecy” (21), exploring our understanding of ‘the sacred’ and questioning whether Abraham’s silence and his singular commitment to God may only be understood within a religious framework.

For Derrida, secrecy describes a structure which, like the promise, is made possible through language; as Joseph Kronick reveals, “There is something like a secret every time, which is to say, everywhere, there is writing”.<sup>90</sup> Secrecy gestures towards an impossible and unknowable exterior, the trace of something older than language within language. Derrida describes:

a kind of shibboleth, a secret formula such as can be uttered only in a certain way in a certain language. As a chance or aleatory effect, the untranslatability of this formal economy functions like a secret within one’s so-called natural or mother tongue. (88)

For Derrida, bearing witness to the secret is problematic, as bearing witness would demand naming and exposing it, a process which would in turn betray and destroy its secrecy. In this, secrecy parallels the gift, which is both generated and annulled by the process of naming. Indeed, Derrida claims that “Secrecy is the last word of the gift which is the last word of the secret” (30). Here, in order to address this problem of bearing witness, Derrida returns to apophatic language, insisting: “To share a secret is not to know or to reveal the secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined. What is a secret that is a secret about nothing and a sharing that doesn’t share anything?” (80)

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<sup>90</sup> Joseph G. Kronick, *Derrida and the Future of Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 4.

Derrida looks to respond to the theoretical difficulties of bearing witness to the secret or secrecy without destroying it by demonstrating how silence and secrecy are interconnected, and thus responding affirmatively to the question: “Can one witness in silence? By silence?” (73) Just as secrecy is not defined as the retention of discrete information, for Derrida, witnessing does not entail producing a factually accurate representation or exposing that which was previously concealed, rather testifies to and re-affirms a certain structure of non-manifestation. Thus, bearing witness involves using linguistic modes to retain rather than reveal that which defies expression in some way. Again, this structure draws attention to Abraham’s singularity; he is, for Kierkegaard, “a witness and not a teacher”,<sup>91</sup> “a witness of the absolute faith that cannot and must not witness before men” (73), and his speech and actions cannot be translated into ethical or universal language.

Derrida again emphasises the linguistic nature of this practice of witnessing, as well as its links to religious structures. Elsewhere, in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, he illustrates how witnessing instantiates the paradox of language by demonstrating the necessary translation, and therefore betrayal, of the singular event into the generality of language. As such, the words of witnessing “must promise their own repetition and thus their own quasi-technical reproducibility... Consequently the instant is instantaneously, at this very instant, divided, destroyed by what it nonetheless makes possible- testimony”.<sup>92</sup> Linguistic witnessing is therefore, both necessary and impossible. For Derrida, not only is language the mode in which one must bear witness, the language itself bears witness. Referring again to Patočka’s work, he explains, “The narrative is genealogical but it is not simply an act of memory. It bears witness, in the manner of an ethical or political act, for today and for tomorrow” (35). This accounts for Derrida’s scrupulous attention to mode and detail in his writing practice. In *The Gift of Death*, he adopts and develops a structure of linguistic silence, and therefore secrecy, which in turn bears witness to both the specifics of the narrative and to the infinite nature of signification. Consequently, in the text, Derrida both bears witness to extra-textual events, and demonstrates how bearing witness itself becomes the event.

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<sup>91</sup> Kierkegaard cited in Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 73.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 33.

This act of bearing witness becomes a way of assuming and fulfilling responsibility; in the case of Abraham, ‘a witness and not a teacher’, this responsibility is absolute responsibility to God. This question of responsibility and the disjunction between singular responsibility and ethical universality, links Abraham’s controversial actions and Patočka’s conceptual genealogy. Derrida follows Kierkegaard in interpreting Abraham’s intended actions as an ethical transgression which contravenes his duties as both father and leader. Ethically speaking, he is “a murderer” (85) whose actions can only be interpreted otherwise within a religious framework. Derrida employs Kierkegaard’s distinctions between the aesthetic, ethical and religious as modes of living, with the religious level valued most highly and embodied by the ‘Knight of Faith’, here represented by Abraham. The ethical level is defined by universality and is therefore often breached by religious demands as the individual acknowledges and fulfils their singular commitment to God above all else. Whereas, “The ethical involves me in substitution, as does speaking” (61), religious responsibility cannot be translated into generality and explained linguistically as it is entirely singular, unique and incommunicable, thus accounting for Abraham’s silence and secrecy. The ‘tragic hero’ who represents the ethical may explain and share his actions, yet Abraham as ‘Knight of Faith’, “cannot be mediated”,<sup>93</sup> and “*cannot speak*”;<sup>94</sup> he thus, in Derrida’s words, “declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification” (62).

Derrida states that responsibility comprises two components: the active or practical, and the theoretical, which answers for the action, for example in its awareness of causes and consequences. This relationship is one of “original and irreducible complexity” (25) as the two elements are necessarily connected yet heterogeneous. The act or decision always occurs before the theoretical element (i.e. its justification), and as such, irresponsibility always intrudes into even the most responsible of acts. This renders an inescapable separation between the act and the dogma of responsibility, and “keeps responsibility apart and in secret” (26). Further, the association of ‘religion’, as that which designates an institution with a structure and history, with responsibility, here a singular, often ethically transgressive commitment, reveals an internal tension. The collective history of religion, which appears as a history of responding and responsibility, is therefore the tracing of singular, unshareable and at the time, unjustifiable events. Through its two narrative threads, *The Gift of Death* enacts the impossible encounter between history and the event,

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<sup>93</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 89.

<sup>94</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 139.

revealing the 'historic event' to be a necessary contradiction which both forms and deforms the historical narrative. For Derrida, the event, as expression of singular subjectivity and here responsibility, disrupts linear temporality, can never be realised fully *in itself*, and is therefore experienced through surrounding signs or symptoms and expressed through the future anterior as that which *will have* taken place. The event is both constitutive and disruptive of history, which "depends on such an excessive beginning" (6).<sup>95</sup> Derrida argues that such events as manifestations of one's singular responsibility to God which exceed historical expression, should never be reduced to it; history "must not touch the essence of an experience that consists precisely in tearing oneself away from one's one historical conditions" (5). Thus, accepting Kierkegaard's claim that "faith... has no history", progressive and teleological conceptions of history should be passed over in favour of a "nonhistory of absolute beginnings." Consequently, "we must always start over". Derrida's reading preserves this paradox, in which the 'Binding of Isaac' is both part of "a history... a story" (80), or rather various histories, and a singular, unhistoricisable event, as "taking it to be a fable still amounts to losing it to philosophical or poetic generality; it means that it loses the quality of a historic event" (66).

In this section I have shown that, for Derrida, being 'silent' enables secrecy, bearing witness and responsibility, states which interpellate the subject and emphasise the singularity of religious commitment. In the next section, I shall investigate how this understanding of subjectivity, responsibility and silence anchors Derrida's reconfiguration of 'God'.

### (c) Rewriting God: From Transcendence to Immanence?

The unseen figure of God and his absolute yet incomprehensible authority, is central to accounts of the 'Binding of Isaac'. However, rejecting traditional ideas of the God of revelation as transcendent and omnipotent, Derrida looks to rewrite the concept of God, which he develops out of his experience and understanding of language. In this section, I shall examine Derrida's definitions of God in *The Gift of Death*, considering both their persuasiveness and any tensions between them, and relating them to the ideas and imperatives of silence, secrecy and bearing witness which motivate the text.

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<sup>95</sup> In this way it resembles law. See Derrida, 'Force of Law', pp. 230-298.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida defines God in two ways: first, as the structure of the secret which constitutes human subjectivity, and secondly as the 'absolute other'. The first definition finds God inextricably linked to ideas of silence and secrecy. Here, as testament to the double movement which characterises deconstruction, Derrida regards this re-vision of 'God' as both faithful and unfaithful to monotheistic tradition. He declares:

It is perhaps necessary, if we are to follow the traditional Judaeo-Christiano-Islamic injunction, but also at the risk of turning it against that tradition, to think of God and of the name of God without such idolatrous stereotyping or representation. Then we might say: God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. Once such a structure exists, of being-with-oneself, of speaking, that is, of producing invisible sense, once I have within me, *thanks to the invisible word as such*, a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore *at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself*, once I can have a secret relationship with myself and not tell everything, once there is secrecy, and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists, (there is) what I call God in me, (it happens that) I call myself God- a phrase that is difficult to distinguish from 'God calls me', for it is on that condition that I can call myself or that I am called in secret. God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self', he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity. And he is made manifest, he manifests his nonmanifestation when, in the structures of the living or the entity, there appears in the course of phylo- and ontogenetic history, the possibility of secrecy, however differentiated, complex, plural, and overdetermined it be; that is, when there appears the desire and power to render absolutely invisible and to constitute within oneself a witness of that invisibility. That is the history of God and of the name of God as the history of secrecy... (108-9)

Derrida argues that 'God' names a certain structure of subjectivity in which the interior 'self' cannot be externally manifested, and that this structure guarantees the heterogeneity and otherness of other 'selves'. God both calls the 'self' into existence and names its very structure of subjectivity. This link between religion, specifically Christianity, and the development of a particular subjectivity is evident in Derrida's description of Patočka's history of responsibility as a "history of egological subjectivity" (19). Further, Derrida insists that "Religion presumes access to the responsibility of a free self" (2). This development of "the Christian self" (6), from which follows the instantiation of a certain political subjectivity, is ascribed to the dissymmetrical encounter with God and the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*. Derrida describes: "This trembling seizes one at the moment of becoming a person, and the person can become what it is only in being paralyzed [*transie*], in its very singularity, by the gaze of God" (6). This shift from Platonism to Christianity in

Patočka's narrative is inscribed as the passage from exterior to interior; experienced both individually and collectively, it is the "becoming-historical of humankind" (6). Through this notion of God as a certain linguistic non-manifestation, Derrida narrates an equivalent shift: from Abraham, whose linguistic silence bears witness to an external, transcendent God, to Derrida's own text, in which God is immanent to the very experiences of silence, secrecy and witnessing.

Derrida's second definition of God, as the 'absolute other', is reiterated numerous times in *The Gift of Death*. Derrida describes "the absolute other... the absolute singularity of the other, whose name here is God" (66); later asserting that "God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique (the God of Abraham defined as the one and unique)" (68); and reinforcing, "The absolute other: God, if you wish" (69). This repeated association of God with the 'absolute other' is also achieved through the use of linguistic silence within the text. For Derrida, such a silence, which remains intrinsic to, and signifies within, language, provides a way of being 'in secret' and bearing witness to that which resists manifestation, the extra-linguistic or 'other' within language. This is what Derrida names God. Whereas associating God with absolute silence would link God's otherness to absolute transcendence, Derrida's use of relative or linguistic silence reinforces his reconfiguration of the meaning of 'God'.

The significance of God in *The Gift of Death* is determined by the interaction between these definitions of God as 'absolute other', and as the structure of secrecy or subjectivity. Shakespeare regards the two as incompatible; he states:

How far Derrida is committed to this position is unclear. However, it is fraught with tension. If God is met as infinite alterity, how can 'God' name a possibility that 'I' have? At this point, Derrida seems to fall back on a reductionist option which is as open to challenge as the crude realism which he rejects as idolatrous. Surely whatever God names eludes any control or possession on my part; and if that is so, it cannot be equated with a characteristic of human subjectivity without further ado.<sup>96</sup>

Shakespeare's dismissal of the definitions as incompatible seems overhasty for three reasons. First, he overlooks the way that the structure of subjectivity that Derrida describes ensures the otherness of every other, thus linking the two definitions through God's relationship to otherness. Secondly, Shakespeare incorrectly perceives a subjective element in the structure

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<sup>96</sup> Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard*, p. 139.

of subjectivity. Finally, the two are also linked through the connected structures of secrecy and witnessing, as God is, for Derrida, the “present-absent witness of every oath or of every possible pledge”.<sup>97</sup> In Derrida’s dynamic process of witnessing, God is variously presented as witness, witnessed and witnessing, and also figures as an other or third, *pace* Levinas: “this ‘thirdness’ [tertialite] turns or makes turn toward it, like a witness (terstis) made to bear witness to it”.<sup>98</sup> Further, the relationship with God as other provides the model for every other relationship, as, “The *a-dieu*, for God or before God and before anything else or any relation to the other, [is] in every other adieu” (47). This structure of bearing witness or giving testimony, so central to *The Gift of Death*, is for Derrida a uniquely religious act; elsewhere, he maintains that “any testimony testifies in essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof”.<sup>99</sup> This association between religion and witnessing is reinforced by Hent de Vries, who reveals, following Derrida, that, “To sin then, would thus precisely be to fail to bear witness”.<sup>100</sup> It seems that Shakespeare’s critique oversimplifies Derrida’s definitions of God, and that otherness and subjectivity are, for Derrida, profoundly interrelated, rather than opposed. Further, Derrida’s retention of two definitions of God, rather than collapsing them into one, looks to develop the association of God with self-difference, rather than self-identity and sovereignty.

Another critic who evaluates Derrida’s account of God in *The Gift of Death* is Marius Timmann Mjaaland. In his comparative study of Kierkegaard and Derrida, Mjaaland assesses Derrida’s claims about God and considers Kierkegaard’s influence on Derrida. He identifies a similarity between the thinkers’ conceptions of God; for both, “the sign ‘God’ refers to a condition of possibility that *opens* the space, opens the self as the space of possibility, as a self that is called by God”.<sup>101</sup> Despite this, he argues that the Kierkegaard of *The Sickness Unto Death* would consider Derrida’s God to be lost in the circularity of self-reference.<sup>102</sup> Tracking the historical precedents of Derrida’s concept of God, notably ontotheological and Enlightenment philosophical definitions, Mjaaland observes that although there is something traditionally Jewish in Derrida’s rejection of representations of

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<sup>97</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, pp. 42-101 (p. 65).

<sup>98</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 29. This third, present in all interactions, could also be perceived as silence; see Picard, p. 25.

<sup>99</sup> Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 75.

<sup>100</sup> De Vries, p. 394.

<sup>101</sup> Mjaaland, p. 305.

<sup>102</sup> Mjaaland, p. 305.

God as idolatrous, his God is rather “a certain late modern *repetition* of the Christian concept of God”,<sup>103</sup> albeit one whose complete interiority conflicts with the transcendence of the Christian God. Mjaaland rejects the proximity and interiority of Derrida’s understanding of God, in part because he perceives both *hubris* and inescapable self-referentiality in considering God to be “the hidden and secret ‘surplus’ in the self’s relationship to itself”.<sup>104</sup> Such a definition is somewhat redeemed, according to Mjaaland, by the inherence of God’s otherness in language, which:

makes the relationship to God an integral proposition, not only of the relationship to the other, but also of the relationship to oneself, through the designation of the other as other and of oneself as oneself. This prevents a purely instrumental understanding of language, and gives it an ethical and religious *meaning* which is determined by the relationship to the other.<sup>105</sup>

This account underlines the importance of the relationship between God and language for Derrida’s accounts of religion and ethics, and I would only quibble with Mjaaland’s accusation of self-referentiality, which seems to overlook the way in which language renders otherness internal to the self-relationship. Appearing to contradict his earlier, positive appraisal of Derrida’s understanding of God, and again underplaying the function of the ‘other *qua* other’ in the formation of subjectivity, Mjaaland reiterates this critique of self-referentiality, suggesting that such a God would be “empty,”<sup>106</sup> “subjective, and abstract,”<sup>107</sup> and merely a “function of the self”. He continues:

With God as a ‘structure of invisible interiority’, the concept of God may be reduced to a function of the self. This makes Derrida’s concept of God too weak to be able to open up the self to the other *qua* other- in the philosophical, religious and ethical sense. His concept of God exhausts its meaning in the interpretation of writing as writing, as a *secret* inscribed upon writing and the self-relationship (*il y a là du secret*).<sup>108</sup>

Mjaaland’s scepticism towards Derrida’s linguistic definition of God (‘writing as writing’) seems to depart from Derrida’s rejection of more orthodox definitions, yet Mjaaland resists a clear statement of his own position. Yet, despite these potential limitations of Mjaaland’s

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<sup>103</sup> Mjaaland, p. 308.

<sup>104</sup> Mjaaland, p. 306.

<sup>105</sup> Mjaaland, p. 307.

<sup>106</sup> Mjaaland, p. 305.

<sup>107</sup> Mjaaland, p. 309.

<sup>108</sup> Mjaaland, p. 310.



claims, his critique reveals a telling frustration with the interiority of Derrida's account of God, a disjunction between interior and exterior which he traces back to Kierkegaard, of whom he claims: "At the moment when he confronts the exterior world on a political level, it becomes obvious that Kierkegaard himself lacks a differentiated reflection on how God affects the relationship between the interior and exterior".<sup>109</sup> Returning to *The Gift of Death*, Mjaaland states:

I find such a circumscription of philosophical and religious piety far too pietistic, in fact, far too traditional, and it suits all too well the modern view on religion as a strictly private matter... The entire exteriority is affected by the question of God, politically, ethically, aesthetically and philosophically.<sup>110</sup>

I shall return to Mjaaland's claim that the question of God cannot be confined to the private but permeates the external sphere, later in this chapter and in Chapter Four. First however, I shall demonstrate Derrida's ambivalence towards the internalisation of God which Mjaaland perceives in his work.

Derrida's seemingly internalised conception of God chimes with Oliver Davies and Denys Turner's observation-with regard to the resurgence of interest in negative theology- of a "deeply rooted trend in contemporary religiosity towards the privatisation and internalisation of religion, whereby faith is translated into transcendence or 'religious experience' which is indifferent or even hostile to traditional beliefs and practices".<sup>111</sup> Derrida's work is clearly sceptical towards the beliefs and structures of institutional religion, and, by aligning 'God' with the generation of subjectivity, he seems to be constructing an image of God which is private and internal. For him, it is the dissymmetry of the encounter between God and 'self' which creates both subjectivity, responsibility and being towards death, "namely, this exposing of the soul to the gaze of another person, of a person as transcendent other, as an other who looks at me, but who looks without the-subject-who-says-I being able to reach that other, see her, hold her within the reach of my gaze" (25). However, this seemingly internalised process also illustrates, following Levinas's account of the ethical encounter, that exposure to otherness institutes subjectivity. Here, Derrida both reveals and challenges Levinas's influence, describing: "There is no face-to-face exchange of

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<sup>109</sup> Mjaaland, p. 309.

<sup>110</sup> Mjaaland, p. 308.

<sup>111</sup> Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, 'Introduction', in *Silence and the Word*, as before, pp. 1-10 (p. 2).

looks between God and myself, between the other and myself. God looks at me and I don't see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out [*ce regard qui me regarde*] that my responsibility comes into being" (91). God and subjectivity are further linked, for Derrida, by the impossibility of complete manifestation, and the 'existence' of a mystery, silence, or promise preserved by Derrida's mode of 'avoiding speaking'. Derrida insists upon "the authentic mystery of the person" which "must *remain* mysterious", arguing that "we should approach it only by letting it be what it is in truth- veiled, withdrawn, dissimulated" (37). Yet this too, which refers to the importance of silence and secrecy, is not a simple withdrawal into privacy and interiority; the secret, as I shall demonstrate explicitly in the next chapter, itself disrupts the relationship between public and private, naming the possibility of a hiddenness or non-manifestation which is not confined to the private realm.

Derrida's retelling of the 'Binding of Isaac' in *The Gift of Death* also questions any simplistic opposition between faith and religion, or between the interior and exterior elements of religion. Challenging the narrative of a disparity between the singular, individual and ahistorical experience of faith which encounters the historical, universal institution of religion (internal meeting external), Derrida shows that the purely internal experience is always already contaminated by the exterior, that history is itself internalised and that this 'encounter' therefore takes place both within and without. Consequently, any boundary between interior and exterior is shifting and permeable.

#### **(d) 'Religion and Ethics: Kierkegaard and Levinas**

Aside from Mjaaland, who identifies a "mutual complementarity"<sup>112</sup> between Kierkegaard and Derrida, other recent critics have also identified Kierkegaard's influence on Derrida as a key point of access to the latter's writings on religion and subjectivity. These include Don Cupitt, who labels Derrida "the modern Kierkegaard",<sup>113</sup> and John Llewelyn, who looks to assert the autonomy of religious experience from religious dogma and institution. Focusing on "religion in general",<sup>114</sup> that is, non-dogmatic, disruptive and responsive to the singular, he looks "to fend off God",<sup>115</sup> perceiving God as that which is irrecoverable from

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<sup>112</sup> Mjaaland, p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> Don Cupitt, *Only Human* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. xii. For comparative studies of Kierkegaard and Derrida see Mjaaland and John Llewelyn, *Margins of Religion: Between Kierkegaard and Derrida*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>114</sup> Llewelyn, *Margins*, p. 360.

<sup>115</sup> Llewelyn, *Margins*, p. 365.

ontotheology. Although he constructs a more generative reading of Derrida's understanding of God elsewhere, as he writes of "the optical option between *seeing* through God and seeing *through* God",<sup>116</sup> Llewelyn doesn't fully explore the complex relationship between the two thinkers. This relationship is in part determined by Kierkegaard's exploration of the differences between ethics and religion, a tension on which Derrida focuses in his examination of Kierkegaard and Levinas in *The Gift of Death* and which again relates to the problematic relationship between interior and exterior, or singular and universal commitments. Responding to Derrida's presentation of Kierkegaard and Levinas's different approaches to the ethical dilemma of Genesis 22, I shall investigate this tension further now.

At first glance, Kierkegaard and Levinas's positions towards the relationship between ethics and religion seem radically opposed. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard depicts the religious level of experience, in which one is motivated by faith, "the highest passion in a human being"<sup>117</sup> and responds to one's "absolute duty to God",<sup>118</sup> as in some way superior to ethical experience. In contrast, Levinas celebrates the pre-eminence of the ethical, for, "It is there, in the ethical, that there is an appeal to the uniqueness of the subject".<sup>119</sup> However, it seems that such a bald opposition between Levinas and Kierkegaard, and therefore between the demands of ethics and religion, is reductive.

First, Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical is not reducible to "the general",<sup>120</sup> or to that which is overcome or contravened in pursuit of the religious; rather, as Shakespeare remarks, the ethical "is a category under dispute",<sup>121</sup> both within *Fear and Trembling* and as it is modified in the course of Kierkegaard's work. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard's use of a pseudonym enables him to explore and express ideas without committing to them, and thus this position, which displays at least a scepticism towards the ethical, cannot simply be conflated with that of de Silentio.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, rather than confirming a Kierkegaardian model of the ethical, here, Jerome Gellman argues, the ethical is allied "with Hegelian morality as immanent in the societal institutions of which one is a

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<sup>116</sup> John Llewelyn, *Seeing Through God: A Geophenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 142.

<sup>117</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 146.

<sup>118</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 108.

<sup>119</sup> Levinas cited in Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 78.

<sup>120</sup> Levinas cited in Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 78.

<sup>121</sup> Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard*, p. 141.

<sup>122</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), p. 213. Evans reveals the divergence between de Silentio and Kierkegaard at various points during the text.

part”,<sup>123</sup> a position from which Kierkegaard strongly diverges. Furthermore, C. Stephen Evans suggests that we should consider the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* as part of Kierkegaard’s ongoing attempt to fashion a new proto-existential ethics. Evans argues:

It seems clear that the life of faith is not a life that repudiates ethical existence, but rather substitutes a new conception of the ethical for that which underlies prevailing social ethics. The new conception differs from the old one in two fundamental ways: (1) the basis of the ethic is not the collective judgments of society but the transcendent message of God; (2) the ethic does not merely prescribe ideals but concerns itself with the concrete conditions that make it possible to realise its ideals.<sup>124</sup>

However, despite the subtleties of Kierkegaard’s position, it remains subject to critique from Levinas, who perceives in it a misunderstanding and devaluation of the ethical. For Levinas, “the attention Abraham pays to the voice that brings him back to the ethical order... is the most intense moment of the drama”.<sup>125</sup> Levinas’s disapproval of Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Genesis 22 derives from his rejection of Kierkegaard’s understanding of subjectivity, and its influence on his reading of Abraham. Levinas argues:

Thus faith, the going forth from self, the only possible going forth for subjectivity, is the solitary tête-à-tête with what for Kierkegaard admits of nothing but the tête-à-tête: God... It carries within it an irresponsibility, a ferment of disintegration... Thus begins the disdain for the ethical basis of being, the somehow secondary nature of all ethical phenomena that, through Nietzsche, has led us to the amorality of the most recent philosophers.<sup>126</sup>

As Merold Westphal notes, Levinas perceives Kierkegaard’s faith as “irresponsibility rather than responsibility, that in all its preoccupation with its own God relation it leaves the neighbour in the lurch”.<sup>127</sup> Critics including Westphal argue that Levinas overstates the differences between himself and Kierkegaard, with Westphal observing a structural similarity between Levinas’s “ethical transcendence” and Kierkegaard’s “religious

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<sup>123</sup> Gellman, p. 32. For a discussion of the role of Kantian and Hegelian conceptions of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*, see Evans, p. 215.

<sup>124</sup> Evans, p. 222. See also Mjaaland’s discussion of Kierkegaard’s use of the terms “ethical-religious and the *other* ethics”, Mjaaland, p. 111.

<sup>125</sup> Levinas cited in Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 78. The question of whether this is an original part of the narrative remains contested. See for example Omri Boehm’s claim that “The angelic intervention seems to be the product of a later redaction. In the original story, therefore, we actually learn whether Abraham would eventually have gone through with the sacrifice.” Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), p. 48.

<sup>126</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. by Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 70-2.

<sup>127</sup> Westphal, p. 219.

transcendence”.<sup>128</sup> Further, he charges Levinas with a limited reading of Kierkegaard, noting a lack of reference to *Works of Love*, a text in which Kierkegaard relates the experience of faith and responsibility to being with one’s neighbour. Similarly, Karl Verstrynge finds in both Kierkegaard and Levinas, “the notion of a strange element that at once destabilizes and constitutes the subjectivity of the subject”.<sup>129</sup>

The suggestion that the thinkers are more alike than Levinas cares to admit is reinforced by Derrida’s examination of two different readings of the phrase ‘tout autre est tout autre’ in *The Gift of Death*. Of these readings,

One of them keeps in reserve the possibility of reserving the quality of the wholly other, in other words, the *infinite other*, for God alone, or in any case for a single other. The other attributes to or recognizes in this infinite alterity of the wholly other, every other, in other words each, each one, for example each man and woman. (83)

The first reading, referring to the absolute otherness of God, is clearly attributable to Kierkegaard’s understanding of religious experience, whereas the second, in which this absolute otherness can be experienced through every instance of otherness, refers to Levinas’s depiction of the ethical. In the text, Derrida affirms both readings of ‘tout autre est tout autre’ whilst demonstrating their interdependence. Thus God is represented as both the absolute other who secures the value and significance of all instances of alterity, and alternatively, as one other amongst many. In the first case, it is the figure of God’s otherness which generates the language of responsibility, ethics and commitment. Derrida explains: “As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty” (68). Here otherness has a religious significance. However, in the second reading, Derrida retains the language of ‘absolute singularity’ and “absolute responsibility” (67), derived from the example of Abraham, as well as the structure of bearing witness to otherness through silence and secrecy, yet dispensing with the surety of a transcendent God to ensure the meaning of this otherness. However, Derrida suggests that the clear distinction between the two positions cannot be maintained, rather:

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<sup>128</sup> Westphal, p. 202.

<sup>129</sup> Karl Verstrynge, ‘Despite Oneself: Subjectivity and its Secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas’, in *Despite Oneself: Subjectivity and its Secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas*, ed. by Claudia Welz and Karl Verstrynge (London: Turnshare Ltd., 2008), pp. 1-8 (p. 8).

If every human is wholly other, if everyone else, or every other one, is every bit other, then one can no longer distinguish between a claimed generality of ethics that would need to be sacrificed in sacrifice, and the faith that turns towards God alone, as wholly other, turning away from human duty. But since Levinas also wants to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and the 'same' infinite alterity of every human, or of the other in general, then he cannot simply be said to be saying something different from Kierkegaard. Neither one nor the other can assure himself of a concept of the ethical and of the religious that is of consequence; and consequently they are especially unable to determine the limit between those two orders. Kierkegaard would have to admit, as Levinas reminds him, that ethics is also the order of and respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same. He cannot therefore distinguish so conveniently between the ethical and the religious. But for his part, in taking into account absolute singularity, that is, the absolute alterity obtaining in relations between one human and another, Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human. His ethics is already a religious one. In the two cases the border between the ethical and the religious becomes more problematic, as do all attendant discourses. (84)

Consequently, for Derrida, the simplistic definitions of ethics as a discourse of universality, religion as a discourse of singularity, and responsibility as that to which both discourses make claim, are destabilised by the interaction between the terms. One consequence of this is a translation of the tension between ethics and religion, or universality and singularity to within the ethical sphere. Mjaaland observes that "both Levinas and Kierkegaard introduce the religious *within* the ethical sphere",<sup>130</sup> a move which Derrida follows in translating absolute responsibility out of its purely religious context, and into contemporary life. Thus, we are all infinitely responsible, "we no longer know who is called Abraham" (79) because every time we are torn by conflicting demands, we are, in effect, Abraham. Ethics in this sense would demand the same singular responsibility as a religious call. As such, ethics would then be divided, naming "an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility" (61). However, for Derrida, the gap between the two readings (religion as internal or external to ethics) and the tension between religion and ethics is never wholly subsumed into the ethical. In this way, Mjaaland argues that the formula 'tout autre est tout autre': "opens a space *between* the two readings of *Fear and Trembling* which is indefinable and allows the two readings to stand over against each other in such a way that the differences are not removed and neither

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<sup>130</sup> Mjaaland, p. 111

reading is permitted to replace the other”.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, the other reading, in which the religious remains external to, and in tension with, ethics, is also sustained.

Derrida consistently re-inscribes this double reading. Although he looks to translate both the concept of God and the idea of absolute commitment and responsibility into an ethical framework through a deconstructive understanding of subjectivity, he also stresses the inadequacy of political, legal and philosophical accounts of ethics in the face of the exorbitance of religion and religious responsibility. In this way, he underlines the irreducibility of religion to ethics revealing: “As soon as I enter into a relationship with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics...” (68). Similarly, he declares elsewhere: “I am really Kierkegaardian: the experience of faith is something that exceeds language in a certain way, it exceeds ethics, politics and society”.<sup>132</sup> Consequently, Shakespeare’s claim that “Religious language opens a way to articulate the irreducible ethical import of deconstruction”<sup>133</sup> is both accurate and insufficient, as the religious language used cannot ultimately be contained within this framework. This is instantiated by Derrida’s chapter on Genesis 22 which figures as a shudder of religious singularity in the text, excluding other discourses, particularly those of ethics, philosophy and politics, until later pages.

Mjaaland’s accusation- that Derrida’s ‘God’ remains inescapably and unhelpfully interiorised- reinforces a simplistic binary between interior and exterior which Derrida’s entire *oeuvre*, and particularly his strategy of the ‘double reading’, look to challenge. In the final section of this chapter I shall recapitulate my argument so far, and suggest that, although Derrida’s account of God evades this critique, he too is reluctant to discuss how this account and the modes of writing which enable it, might provide a way of responding to the aporias between ethics and religion, and ethics and politics.

#### 4. Conclusion

At the start of the chapter, I outlined two types or interpretations of silence: absolute and relative. In my analysis of ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ and *The Gift of Death*, I showed that for Derrida, relative or linguistic silence which is already embedded within language and communication may be brought to express that which is silenced or

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<sup>131</sup> Mjaaland, p. 111.

<sup>132</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Epoché and Faith’, pp. 27-50 (p. 39).

<sup>133</sup> Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard*, p. 237.

suppressed by other linguistic modes. Regarding 'Denials', I argued that this mode of 'avoiding speaking', influenced by negative theology, enabled the preservation of the 'promise', developed by Derrida into conceptions of God both as a promise or otherness which insists within language, and as the infinite nature of signification. This silence proved effective for approaching and rethinking divinity, highlighting the association of God with language and enabling Derrida to generate multiple definitions of God and fragmented histories which serve as a counter to absolute, monolithic, self-same conceptions of God and homogenised histories. Identifying a similar mode, structure and silence in the account of the 'Binding of Isaac' in *The Gift of Death*, I showed how for Derrida, the language of silence removes the need for violent and untruthful manifestation, permitting that which cannot be expressed to remain hidden, veiled or secret, and complementing the dialogical mode of multiple voices explored in Chapter Two. Akin to the promise in 'Denials', Derrida's mode of 'avoiding speaking' is allied with being 'in secret', which in turn enables bearing witness or becoming responsible, states which draw out the singularity of the subject. Derrida connects this notion of subjectivity with God, defined both as absolute otherness, and as the internalised structure of subjectivity. These related yet non-identical notions deviate from the traditional conception of God as sovereign and self-identical. Responding to Mjaaland's critique of the interiorised nature of Derrida's understanding of God, I argued that this understanding draws out the interrelation between interior and exterior, same and other, and challenges any fixed binaries. Similarly, turning to the apparent tension between ethics and religion as explored through Kierkegaard and Levinas, I demonstrated that Derrida's insistence on the double reading of 'tout autre est tout autre' prevents any resolution between, or conflation of, the two terms, and emphasises the irreducibility of religion to ethics.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida repeatedly stresses the dissimilarity between 'avoiding speaking' and philosophy, which is allied with "the very order and essence of manifestation" (66), and disavows secrecy. He presents this as a limitation of philosophy, disclosing that, "By disavowing this secret, philosophy would have come to reside in a misunderstanding of what there is to know, namely, that there is secrecy and that it is incommensurable with knowing, with knowledge and objectivity" (92). Such a weakness is not confined to philosophy but also affects ethics and politics as traditionally understood. Derrida explains:



There are no final secrets for philosophy, ethics, or politics. The manifest is given priority over the hidden or the secret, universal generality is superior to the hidden... But the paradox of faith is that interiority remains 'incommensurable with exteriority'. (63)

Again in a familiar double reading, Derrida both accepts and re-inscribes this 'paradox of faith', both insisting that there is no pure interiority, and acknowledging an irreducible 'otherness' which can't be assimilated by philosophy.<sup>134</sup> This double reading, incomprehensible to, and prohibited by, philosophical discourse, is facilitated by his adoption of the complementary discourses of dialogue and silence; the former assumes multiple voices and perspectives to approach that which challenges current modes of expression, whereas the latter looks to let it speak through the gaps and spaces it leaves.

*The Gift of Death* gestures understatedly towards some of the ethical and political implications both of Derrida's choice of modes and of his reconfiguration of God. Derrida's dual understanding of God as absolute alterity and as structure of secrecy or subjectivity, conditions his conception of both the self-relation and intersubjectivity, challenging political models of sovereignty derived from the notion of divine sovereignty, and thus supporting Mjaaland's claim that 'The entire exteriority is affected by the question of God, politically, ethically, aesthetically and philosophically'. For Derrida, the truth of individual subjectivity and the possibility of a politics would be connected by a constitutive otherness.

Derrida's adoption of discourses of dialogue and silence, his insistence on the interaction between the two, and on the value of secrecy and non-manifestation, looks towards a politics of non-sovereignty. Such a politics or political discourse would allow rather than disable elements of faith, secrecy and non-manifestation and would not systematically suppress singularity in favour of universality, rather taking into account "the

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<sup>134</sup> John J. Davenport argues that Derrida misunderstands the 'paradox of faith' in *Fear and Trembling*, treating Abraham as a tragic hero rather than as a knight of faith. Derrida, he argues, "reduces Abraham's faith to infinite resignation without eschatological hope" (Davenport, p. 182), mistakenly interprets Isaac's sacrifice metaphorically (on this, see also Gellner, p. 36), and fails to understand that "existential faith consists in trust that all obstacles to the complete realization of the ethical will be overcome 'in the end'" (Davenport, p. 177). Consequently, for Davenport, "Derrida's rhetoric is pure idolatry of aporia, worship of contradiction, sanctification of dilemma- an aestheticization of movement beyond ethics" (Davenport, p. 186). Davenport's rather reactive critique overlooks Derrida's 'double reading' and presents an over-simplified account of his approach to Levinas and Kierkegaard. However, Derrida does seem to overlook Abraham's belief that Isaac will be returned to him "on the strength of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, p. 70) which is frustrating as such a belief parallels Derrida's own development of a structure of thought which challenges accepted notions of possibility and impossibility. John J. Davenport, 'What Kierkegaardian Faith Adds to Alterity Ethics: How Levinas and Derrida Miss the Eschatological Dimension', in *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics and Religion*, ed. by J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 169-196.

impossibility of substitution” (58) and not operating solely according to a programmatic logic of calculation. It would not obscure its own aporetic heritage (85-6) rather it would insistently question the concepts, such as that of responsibility, in which it is grounded. Regarding this, Derrida is scathing towards his critics, recalling the ‘accepted’ position that “One simply keeps on denying the aporia and antimony, tirelessly, and one treats as nihilist, relativist, even poststructuralist, and worse still deconstructionist, all those who remain concerned in the face of such a display of good conscience.” (85) For Derrida, the political is that which, like religion, must constantly negotiate between the singularity of the event and the individual, and the effective universality of history and law, as well as that which must devise a new language which is not prey to such divisive logic.

The importance of such a new language, named ‘post-writing’ in ‘Sauf le nom’, ‘another syntax’ in ‘Denials’, and inspired in part by negative theology which ‘deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism’, is here however, frustratingly underplayed. This language, which rejects traditional philosophical delineations, having first deconstructed their purported neutrality, enables Derrida to rethink God as non self-identical, and to reconfigure the relationships between ethics, religion and politics without falling into the familiar traps created by oppositions such as interiority and exteriority and faith and religion. It would provide a way to express, in Derek Attridge’s terms, “that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving”.<sup>135</sup> Derrida’s ‘double reading’, which resists reinforcing such oppositions or their dialectical resolution, is a key step in the development of such a ‘post-writing’. Similarly, in its resistance to the opposition between private and public modes of religious expression, Derrida’s depiction of God looks to recondition our understanding of what can be thought and achieved. In the final chapter I shall consider how this depiction of God is developed through Derrida’s use of that most philosophical discourse, reason, and how this illuminates the relationships between religion and politics, and the public and the private.

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<sup>135</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London; Routledge, 2004), p. 19.

## Chapter Four: Reason

Derrida's entire oeuvre is preoccupied with the continuous deconstruction of that new *nomos* of reason.

Michael Dillon

The authority of judgment or of the critical evaluation is not the final authority for deconstruction. Deconstruction is also a deconstruction of critique. Which does not mean that all critique or all criticism is devalued, but that one is trying to think what the authority of the critical instance signifies in history - for example in the Kantian sense but not only in the Kantian sense.

Jacques Derrida

### 1. Introduction

Of all Derrida's concerns, reason is perhaps the most enduring. Emerging in his early work, particularly through his dispute with Foucault,<sup>1</sup> issues surrounding the nature and significance of reason persist throughout Derrida's writing. Such issues influence crucial conceptions of subjectivity and alterity, and span both the philosophical investigations of the earlier work and Derrida's later exploration of the ethical and political implications of such investigations. As the Derrida of 'Cogito and the History of Madness' makes clear, reason determines the limits of both thought and action:

The unsurpassable, unique and imperial grandeur of the order of reason, that which makes it not just another actual order or structure (a determined historical structure, one structure among other possible ones), is that one cannot speak out against it except by being for it, that one can protest it only from within its domain. Reason leaves us only the recourse to stratagems and strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Given the apparent power and dominance of reason, it is no surprise that Derrida keeps returning to question both our definitions of, and responses to, it. In this chapter I shall focus primarily on 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', a key text which marks the nexus of the ethical, political and religious concerns of Derrida's later work and continues the ongoing process of determining deconstruction's relationship to the Western philosophical tradition. Here Derrida looks to rethink our understanding of reason, and asks: "How 'to talk religion'? Of religion?"

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<sup>1</sup> For an exploration of this dispute, see Roy Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness', in *Writing and Difference*, as before, pp. 36-76 (p. 42).

Singularly of religion today?”<sup>3</sup> concerning itself with the scope and relevance of religion, its circulation, dissemination and contamination. The intersection of these issues surrounding reason and religion is framed in terms of the contemporary “return of the religious” (45), for Derrida a phenomenon which demands urgent recognition, investigation, and ultimately, action.

In the first part of the analysis, I track Derrida’s argument that the apparently sovereign and divergent discourses of religion and reason are structurally similar, mutually dependent and contradictory or non-self-identical. Moving beyond ‘Faith and Knowledge’, I consider Derrida’s understanding of ‘reason’ in his later texts, particularly his contention that reason is composed of “heterogeneous rationalities”<sup>4</sup> and names the irreducible, non-economic relationship between calculation and the incalculable. This concept of reason, I argue, forms the basis of what Derrida terms the ‘Enlightenment to come’, which presupposes a new understanding of the interaction between philosophy and politics, and, in its emphasis on faith and incalculability, is connected to the ‘return of the religious’. However, returning to ‘Faith and Knowledge,’ I argue that the political focus of the text, linked to the shared future of reason and religion, is accompanied by a suspension of the related question of God. Such a suspension is a result of the association of the question of God with issues of interiority, responsibility and subjectivity, rendering it seemingly problematic to integrate with the political. This suspension results in an undeconstructive tension between the private and the political, which would sustain the claims made by Žižek and Bradley- discussed in Chapter Two- that the religious focus of Derrida’s later work results in a depoliticisation of deconstruction

As ‘Faith and Knowledge’ offers no account or resolution of this tension between private and political, in the second half of the chapter I look outside the text to the philosopher Richard Rorty and to his theorisation of the division between private and public, both in Derrida’s work and beyond. Here I outline Rorty’s vision of a “liberal utopia”<sup>5</sup> in which the hope of uniting public and personal obligations has been abandoned. Assessing this claim and the responses of various critics, along with Rorty’s reading of Derrida, I outline the limitations of this account and argue that it is significant that Rorty’s divergences from Derrida are related to questions of language and literature. Whereas

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, pp. 42-101 (p. 42). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xv.

Rorty, although valuing literature highly, considers it another instantiation of the public/private opposition, I argue that Derrida presents literature as connected both to democracy and public space, singularity and secrecy, and thus offers a potential resolution of what is for Rorty an insuperable division. I also connect Derrida's focus on the literary with his emphasis on 'post-writing' a mode which would challenge naturalized binaries such as that between public and private. Finally, bringing these observations to bear on 'Faith and Knowledge' I suggest that it is the rejection of literary analysis or 'close reading' in favour of topical political critique in the text which generates the restatement of undeconstructive divisions such as those between God and religion, the public and the private, or even ethics and politics.

## **2. Reason, Religion and God: Tensions in 'Faith and Knowledge'**

Editor Gil Anidjar claims that 'Faith and Knowledge' is "Derrida's most explicit treatment of 'religion'".<sup>6</sup> The text revisits Derrida's earlier religious concerns, here however, integrating them within a broader discussion of the links between politics, reason, faith and technology, a task which in its ambition undercuts Kevin Hart's claim that "'Faith and Knowledge' is at heart a modest essay".<sup>7</sup> A weightier critique is offered by Marius Timmann Mjaaland, who suggests that Derrida's observations are less effective when not anchored in a specific text; of 'Faith and Knowledge', he argues: "These deliberations... seem completely outdated less than ten years after their publication".<sup>8</sup> The lack of textual grounding is accompanied by a reduced emphasis on writing, which as I shall later show does influence the scope, mode and focus of the text. Discursive yet fragmented, 'Faith and Knowledge' is divided into fifty two numbered entries arranged over three sections. Like 'Envois', the text is incomplete, "telegraphic" (83), and dramatises problems of form and signification. The premise of its argument is the strict division and perceived antagonism between faith and knowledge, or religion and reason, an opposition which Derrida claims is groundless and unsustainable. I shall begin by examining this claim.

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<sup>6</sup> Gil Anidjar, 'Introduction "Once more, once more": Derrida, the Arab, the Jew', in *Acts of Religion*, as before, pp. 1-39 (p. 40).

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Hart, 'Kingdoms of God', in *Kant after Derrida*, ed. by Philip Rothfield (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), pp. 142-170 (p. 158).

<sup>8</sup> Mjaaland, p. 334.

### (a) Contamination between Reason and Religion

Derrida argues that the opposition between reason and religion is misconceived and proposes that an understanding of the 'return of the religious' requires a shift of perspective from those who "opposed religion, on one side, and on the other, Reason, Enlightenment, Science, Criticism" (45). He insists on "an entirely different schema that would have to be taken as one's point of departure in order to try to think the 'return of the religious'" (45). He initiates such a shift by exposing the contamination between faith and knowledge, arguing that they develop from a single origin and exhibit a mutual dependency.

First, Derrida contends that "religion and reason have the same source" (66), that they "develop in tandem" (66) as both depend on a certain testimonial performativity or on an act of witnessing. Although it is obvious that religion incorporates an element of belief or witnessing, reason too, affiliated with both philosophy and science as the "critical history of the production of knowledge" (66), is dependent on conducting experiments which require a witness. However, in a process of "*sacrificial indemnification*" (66), this single source becomes divided and opposed as the two elements react against each other, remaining linked by the protective gesture of autoimmunity, in effect a controlled contamination. Illustrating the dependence of reason or knowledge on that which is usually termed religion or faith, Derrida returns to the issue of performativity, claiming that discourses of science, knowledge and reason which pride themselves on objectivity require a structurally necessary, and yet disavowed "elementary act of faith" (81) in the form of a fallible witness. This blindspot, he argues, results in the mistaken assertion "not only that one knows what one knows (which wouldn't be too serious) but also that one knows what knowledge is, that is, free, structurally, of belief or of **faith**" (68). A similar oversight occurs in reason's claim to self-justification. As Derrida insists, "the foundation of law... is a 'performative' event that cannot belong to a set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies" (57). However, this performativity, not usually associated with scientific discourse, forms, for Derrida, an inescapable bond between faith and knowledge. He reinforces this claim elsewhere, in *Without Alibi*, asserting:

To link in a certain way faith to knowledge, faith in knowledge, is to articulate movements that could be called performative with constative, descriptive, or theoretical movements. A profession of faith, a commitment, a promise, an assumed

responsibility, all that calls not upon discourses of knowledge but upon performative discourses that produce the event of which they speak.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, although scientific discourses hinge upon knowledge, evidence, experimentation and that which is apparently quantifiable, they are driven by changing human needs and perceptions, occur within a dynamic framework, and require an act of witnessing. Profession or testimony, Derrida asserts, “conditions every ‘social bond’, every questioning, all knowledge, performativity, and every tele-techno-scientific performance, including those of its forms that are most synthetic, artificial, prosthetic, calculable” (98). Derrida also identifies a mystical element in the interaction between humanity and technology, a “counter-fetishization” (91) of the machine whereby the desire to reinstate a more direct relation to the body in light of increased mechanization of this relation is redirected to the machines themselves which are embraced and domesticated. As he explains: “because one increasingly *uses* artifacts and prostheses of which one is totally ignorant, in a growing disproportion between knowledge and know-how, the space of such technical experience tends to become more animistic, magical, mystical” (91).

The incursion of religious elements into scientific discourses and the inescapable dependence of knowledge on faith, is, however mirrored, as Derrida proceeds to assert the opposite, that “the technical is the possibility of faith” (83), and to explain how the global scope of the ‘return of the religious’ is enabled by technology. This occurs in two ways. First, Derrida argues that faith, as a bearing of openness to an unknown other, paradoxically requires that which is “technical, automatic, machine-like” (83) as repetition of the same must be possible both to enable the coming of difference and to render it recognisable as ‘other’. In this respect, as we shall see, it is comparable to the ‘to come’, which although an incursion of difference depends upon “heritage and the possibility of *repeating*” (83). Mechanicity, it seems, both institutes and undermines singularity. This characteristic of both faith and the ‘to come’ present the beginnings of a response to Derrida’s question, iterated in the ‘Confession’ chapter, of how to think the compatibility of event and machine.<sup>10</sup> Such a possibility would require an alternative logic to that of reasoned calculation; perhaps, Derrida suggests in *Specters of Marx*, a logic of spectrality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida discusses this problem in *Without Alibi*: “Pure performativity implies the presence of a living being, and of a living being speaking one time only, in its own name, in the first person. And speaking in a manner that is at once spontaneous, intentional, free and irreplaceable. Performativity, therefore, excludes in principle, in its own moment, any machinelike [machinale] technicity... If, then, some machinality (repetition,

The second way in which Derrida demonstrates that 'the technical is the possibility of faith' is by exposing religion's current practical dependence on and auto-immune relationship with technology, avowing: "Religion today allies itself with tele-technoscience, to which it reacts with all its forces" (82). He claims that the globalization of religion is enabled by technology, exemplified by "the trips and global spectacularizing of the Pope... the interstate dimensions of the 'Rushdie affair'... planetary terrorism" (82). This generates an autoimmune reaction: technologies both increase the influence and power of religions, and threaten their sanctity, sovereignty and propriety through "dislocation, expropriation, delocalization, deracination, disidiomatization and dispossession" (81). The global spread of religion, therefore, entails a loss or "fear of self" (81), and a turn against this alien element, a declaration of "war against that which gives it this new power only at the cost of dislodging it from all its proper places, *in truth from place itself*" (82). Derrida insists that "It is this terrifying but fatal logic of the autoimmunity of the unscathed that will always associate Science and Religion" (80).<sup>12</sup> For Derrida, the inevitable contamination of auto-immunity seems to have an ethical function as it ensures that the community remains "open to something other and more than itself: the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or the love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism" (87). Derrida demonstrates that both reason and religion are always contaminated by their 'other', and this illustration of their co-dependence challenges the perceived sovereignty of both discourses. This attack on their apparent sovereignty is further developed by Derrida's individual analyses of the discourses, in which he undermines their claims to self-identity by considering their self-presentation, defining concepts and internal tensions. Looking first at religion, I shall reiterate Derrida's demonstration that this apparently pure and self-identical concept is divided and disparate,

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calculability, *inorganic* matter of the body) intervenes in a performative event, it is always as an accidental, extrinsic, and parasitical element, in truth a pathological, mutilating, or even mortal element. Here again, to think *both* the machine *and* the performative event together remains a monstrosity to come, an *impossible* event". Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> "Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost", Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida perceives the accusations of 'obscurantism' or 'irrationality' often levelled at religion as a side effect of autoimmunity, the "residues, surface effects, the reactive slag of immunitary, indemnificatory or auto-immunitary reactivity" (p. 81). For further discussion of Derrida's understanding of autoimmunity see Alex Thomson's claim that: "Derrida is not terribly concerned to differentiate between the immune and the autoimmune, accounts for his use of the term 'autoimmunitary' to refer to both processes as if they were a single phenomenon whose perversity or malfunction is regularly and critically indistinguishable from its proper purpose", Alex Thomson, 'What's to Become of "Democracy to Come"?' , *PMC*, 15.3 (2005) (para. 6 of 32).



comprising two different and incompatible strata which produce the effect of auto-immunity.

## **(b) Religion**

Derrida's response to his own question 'How 'to talk religion'? Of religion? Singularly of religion today?' is pragmatic, rejecting etymological and genealogical studies and forgoing any attempt to write "a serious treatise on religion", a task which "would demand the construction of new Libraries of France and of the universe" (76). Instead, he writes "a short treatise" (43), even a "brief press release" (75) whose style is more digressive, disseminative and polemical than a traditional tract or treatise might permit. Further, 'Faith and Knowledge' is highly performative, looking to generate knowledge and understanding through the processes of writing. Such dynamism is at odds with the treatise form in which "one would content oneself with remembering, archiving, classifying, taking note in a memoir of what one *believes* one already *knows*" (76).

Derrida's pragmatic response to the question 'what is religion?' addresses the current "return of the religious" (45). As Kevin Hart observes, "Derrida makes no attempt to offer a comprehensive philosophy of religion... His concern is with an overlap of the philosophy of religion and political philosophy that can be used to explicate 'religion today'".<sup>13</sup> Derrida's diffidence however, is somewhat disingenuous, as the analysis of the contemporary 'return of the religious' is not clearly separable from either the historical significance of the religious or its forms and structures, the questionable existence of "a universal structure of religiosity" (86). My analysis of Derrida's approach to religion will be broadly split into two interconnected parts: the first a consideration of Derrida's assessment of the structure of religion and its autoimmune function; and the second, an investigation of his claims regarding the 'return of the religious'.

### **(i) The Structure of Religion and Autoimmunity**

Derrida introduces 'religion' as an umbrella term which can refer to a variety of disparate and even incompatible ideas and experiences. Its meaning is not self-evident, self-identical and sovereign as, like reason, it contains inescapable internal tensions. Examining these

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<sup>13</sup> Hart, 'Kingdoms of God', pp. 142-170 (p. 158).

widely disavowed tensions, Derrida identifies two radically different sources or strata of the religious:

1. the experience of belief, on the one hand (believing or credit, the fiduciary or the trustworthy in the act of faith, fidelity, the appeal to blind confidence, the testimonial that is always beyond proof, demonstrative reason, intuition); and
2. the experience of the unscathed, of sacredness or of holiness, on the other (70)

This structure is virtually identical to that of reason as Derrida perceives it: one element, the unscathed or sacred, perceives itself as pure, discrete, singular and separate, indeed a certain principle of non-contamination, and the other, the experience of belief, reveals the necessity of contamination, as “faith or fidelity signifies here acquiescing to the testimony of the other- of the *utterly other* who is inaccessible in its absolute source” (70). The incompatibility of these two elements seems to highlight the absurdity of speaking about religion in the singular. However, Derrida argues that these strata are connected by “the experience of **witnessing**” (98), as an observer, inevitably fallible and subjective, is always required to bear witness to the experience of purity or holiness. He asserts, “the necessity for these two heterogeneous sources of religion to mingle their waters, if one can put it that way, without ever, it seems to us, amounting simply to the same” (70), recalling the ‘heterogeneous rationalities’ which he perceived in his investigation of reason. For Derrida, the tension between the two strata is exemplified by the ‘phallic component’ of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The phallus is required to be “heilig, living, strong and fertile, erect and fecund: safe, whole, unscathed, immune, sacred, holy and so on” (85), images that, in deriving from both sources, are inherently contradictory. Derrida describes how the singularity and purity of the phallus is inevitably compromised by the necessary enactment of its fertility which assures its contamination and loss of integrity. Derrida argues that this contamination of purity produces an effect of autoimmunity, by which the pure element adopts a trace of the other in order to avoid complete submission to it. The effect is one of movements, ideas or institutions “*suspending* themselves, and in truth, *interrupting themselves*” (85), and, he argues, is unavoidable. In the case of Christianity, this is exemplified by the official response to the commandment ‘thou shall not kill’. On the one hand, this is borne out by “the ‘fundamentalist’ prohibition of abortion, of artificial insemination” (86), yet on the other, in order to accommodate increasing populations without compromising the sanctity of human life, the Catholic Church paradoxically espouses its “universal sacrificial vocation” (86), exemplified by the acceptance of “large-

scale breeding and slaughtering, in the fishing or hunting industries, in animal experimentation” (86). This autoimmune structure accounts for the interrelation of these two apparently opposed sources of religion. Their simultaneous singularity and duality is also for Derrida, figured by the ellipse, which reveals ‘religion’ as ultimately unknowable; he describes: “‘Religion’ figures their *ellipse* because it both comprehends the two foci but also sometimes shrouds their irreducible duality in silence, in a manner precisely that is secret and *reticent*” (72). This autoimmunity undermines religion’s claims of self-identity and blurs the distinction between itself and its others.

These ‘two sources’ are also comparable to Kant’s division of religion into two types: the institutional or organised, and moral religion, the latter demanding reflexive faith. Professing an interest in the second, Derrida considers: “Because it does not depend essentially upon any historical revelation and thus agrees with the rationality of pure practical reason, reflecting faith favours good will beyond all knowledge” (49). The detachment of religion from historical revelation generates the possibility of “a universal structure of religiosity” (86); here, however, Derrida demonstrates that the structure of religion is always anchored in specific historical expressions.

## (ii) Religious Histories and the ‘Return of the Religious’

Referring both to the resurgence of fundamentalisms, and to an awareness of the widespread influence of religion in contemporary, apparently secular, life, the ‘return of the religious’ is a key focus in ‘Faith and Knowledge’. Derrida insists on acknowledging the specific histories of the term religion, claiming that its very utterance means that “**we are already speaking Latin**” (66). This challenges the possibility of a ‘universal structure of religiosity’ as Derrida reveals the specificity and limits of the apparently universal term religion; Benveniste, he observes, “recalls that there is no ‘common’ Indo-European term for what we call ‘religion’” (72). Rather, the term ‘religion’ derives from a specific idiom and refers to particular historical circumstances. Consequently, Derrida asks whether these terms and concepts, for example, religion ‘within the limits of reason alone’, or ‘moral religion’ can be understood outside of their specific contexts. He concludes that they cannot. Speaking of Kant’s moral law, he asserts that “when it addresses us, it either speaks the idiom of the Christian- or is silent” (50). This attachment to a specific idiom, Derrida suggests, is also an attachment to a book or testament, which, furthermore, “is inseparable from the social nexus, from the political, familial, ethnic, communitarian nexus, from the nation and from

the people” (44). Knowledge of context and idiom are required for the concept of religion to make sense, however this sense is not fixed and the ‘return of the religious’ is not a return of the same but here names a translation of religion beyond the limits of its native idiom, influenced by factors such as globalization and technologization. This shifting significance of the term religion invokes the logic of autoimmunity, as the strength, identity and sovereignty of religion demand a fixed meaning, yet its power increases through propagation which compromises this self-identity; as Derrida asserts: “*Religion* circulates in the world, one might say, like an *English word* <comme un mot anglais> that has been to Rome and taken a detour to the United States” (66).

Although the rise of fundamentalisms is the most controversial contemporary religious expression, Derrida focuses on other, overlooked manifestations. He argues that the Judaeo-Christian influence is still clearly evident in secular humanitarian liberalism, as expressed, for example, in Western military interventions. He contests that it is virtually impossible to “dissociate the essential traits of the religious as such from those that establish, for example, the concepts of ethics, of the juridical, of the political or of the economic”(63), and, consequently, that what is at stake in the current “cyberspaced wars of religion” is no less than the current “determination of the ‘world’, of ‘history’, of the ‘day’ and of the ‘present’” (62). However, despite Derrida’s clear expression of the wide-ranging influence of religion in contemporary life, it is unclear as yet, what he perceives the implications of this to be.

Although he exposes the heterogeneity of the term ‘religion’, Derrida maintains that thinking religion in the singular must always remain possible, a “*may-be*” (63). This association of religion with singularity follows the distinction between ethics and religion advanced in the previous chapter, where ethics refers to a universal commitment which may be translated into generality and religion names the singular responsibility which generates subjectivity. Correspondingly, in ‘Faith and Knowledge’ Derrida argues that “Religion is **the response**” (64). The response and responding are, as we saw in *The Gift of Death*, allied with the singular responsibility of the individual, and point towards a tension between singular and universal in the concept of the ‘religious’. This is here reiterated as Derrida acknowledges that religion partakes in a transhistorical and therefore, social, dialogue, as the response, act or profession of faith consists of “a word committing a future to the present but concerning an event that is past” (68). Consequently, religion marks the

intersection between singular and general,<sup>14</sup> naming the tension between an ahistorical, transcendental structure and the occurrence of historical movements, events and possibilities. Derrida speaks of “a universalizable culture of singularities” which might bridge this gap between singular and general, personal and public, and enable “a ‘rational’ and universal discourse on the subject of ‘religion’” (56). This tension, and Derrida’s responses to it are, in a sense the starting point for rethinking religion, politics and their interrelation through deconstruction.<sup>15</sup>

### (c) Reason

The disavowed yet potentially generative tensions Derrida exposes in the discourse of ‘religion’ parallel those he reveals as he assesses and reinscribes the concept of ‘reason’. In this section, I shall show how Derrida undermines reason’s alleged sovereignty by demonstrating both its groundlessness and its lack of self-identity, and dispels the myth that it is synonymous with calculation by exposing the necessary interrelation between calculation and the incalculable. This challenge to reason’s independence and self-identity does not, however, reduce reason’s significance for Derrida, who uses this revised understanding of reason as the basis of the ‘Enlightenment to come’. Having outlined Derrida’s concept of reason, I shall turn to the ‘Enlightenment to come’ in order to investigate its meaning and implications.

#### (i) The Groundlessness of Reason

In his later work, Derrida emphasises the impossibility of a self-legitimizing discourse or institution. In ‘Force of Law’, for example, he records the violent establishment of law, arguing that this cannot be ‘legally’ justified as it precedes the constitution of law itself.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, reason cannot comprehensively account for its own origins and grounds; it is however, according to Derrida’s article ‘The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils’, preoccupied with its *raison d’être*. Consideration of “the institution of the principle of reason” raises “questions about the origin or ground of this principle of

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<sup>14</sup> Or, as Neil Saccamano describes: “the hiatus between the unconditional and the conditional”. Neil Saccamano, ‘Inheriting Enlightenment, or Keeping faith with reason in Derrida’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40.3 (2007), 405-424 (p. 412).

<sup>15</sup> One such rather problematic response comes in the form of the “*messianicity without messianism*” (p. 56) to which I referred in the ‘Introduction’.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 230-298.

foundation”.<sup>17</sup> Such questioning extends beyond the remit of reason as the principle of reason cannot be grounded in that which proceeds from it, and thus reason develops from a certain arationality. Derrida describes this as a circle which cannot be closed:

The circle would consist in seeking to account for reason by reason, to render reason to the principle of reason, in appealing to the principle at the very point where, according to Heidegger, the principle of reason says nothing about reason itself. The abyss, the hole, the Abgrund, the empty ‘gorge’ would be the impossibility for a principle of grounding to ground itself. This very grounding, then... would have to hold itself suspended above a most peculiar void. Are we to use reason to account for the principle of reason? Is the reason for reason rational? Is it rational to worry about reason and its principle? Not simply; but it would be over-hasty to seek to disqualify this concern and refer to those who experience it back to their own irrationalism, their obscurantism, their nihilism.<sup>18</sup>

This crisis in the grounding of reason recurs in *Rogues* as an autoimmune encounter between ‘grounding’ and running aground; external groundlessness becomes internal tension, the attempt by reason to “win out over itself”.<sup>19</sup> Reason’s dependence on its other, here and in the case of its need for an external witness, “throws reason into crisis”,<sup>20</sup> the existence of “objectivist irrationalism born on the inside of reason itself”<sup>21</sup> undermining its self-identity. Again, in *Points*, Derrida reiterates this limitation on reason’s independence, explaining that its appeal for grounds cannot be answered adequately by philosophy or reason itself:

And the question: *What is reason, what is its interest*, its necessarily pre- or a-rational interest, the reason without reason of reason, and so forth, this question can no longer give rise to demonstrations of a philosophical type (the demonstration that Heidegger puts forward in *Der Satz vom Grund* on a very similar question, from a certain point of view, is already no longer strictly philosophical) or a traditional theoretico-scientific type.<sup>22</sup>

For Derrida this realisation and acceptance of the limits of reason’s jurisdiction necessitates a new type of thinking which does not retreat into the fictive sureties of reason’s sovereignty.

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils’, trans. by Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics*, 13.3 (Autumn 1983), 3-20 (p. 8-9).

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason’, 3-20 (p. 9).

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Ja, or the *faux-bond*’, in *Points*, pp. 30-77 (p. 69).

It is *reasonable*, he argues, to acknowledge and take into account the limits of reason itself, “where the *Grund* opens onto the *Abgrund*”.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in ‘The Principle of Reason’, he asks:

Who is more faithful to reason’s call, who hears it with a keener ear, who better sees the difference, the one who offers questions in return and tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any question about the reason of reason? This is all played out, along the path of the Heideggerian question, in a subtle difference of tone or stress, according to the particular words emphasized in the formula *nihil est sine ratione*.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Derrida claims that reason makes demands on us, that “We have to respond to the call of the principle of reason” which “always entails a certain addressing of speech. The word is not seen, it has to be heard and listened to, this apostrophe that enjoins us to respond to the principle of reason”.<sup>25</sup> Witnessing and responding to reason appropriately entails admitting its limits, and, following Leibniz, ‘rendering’ reason, bringing it forth or making it visible. In revealing reason’s groundlessness, the impossibility of self-validation, Derrida highlights reason’s dependence on, and even contamination by, other discourses, even indicating that “the principle of reason may have obscurantist and nihilist effects”.<sup>26</sup>

#### (ii) ‘Heterogeneous rationalities’: Calculation and the Incalculable

Derrida’s contention that reason’s alleged autonomy is fallacious, and that it must look outside itself for its grounds and authority, is accompanied by an examination of the interior of reason, and the discovery not of self-identity but of “heterogeneous rationalities”.<sup>27</sup> Derrida rejects the assumption- here taken as given- that reason is synonymous with calculation, pointing out reason’s complex history, in his opinion clouded by the assumption of a monolithic and homogeneous meaning.<sup>28</sup> Instead, following this complex history, he advances a concept of reason which is divided and propagates difference. He appeals to “a

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason’, 3-20 (p. 9).

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason’, 3-20 (p. 8).

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason’, 3-20 (p. 15).

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Beardsworth points out that Derrida’s assumption that reason is, or is widely perceived to be, synonymous with calculation is one he shares with much recent French thought. Beardsworth summarises the position: “Reason is considered as a faculty of thought that, abstracting from particularity in its push to universality, reduces the world of difference to measured units of apprehension. In this reduction, the determination of alterity subsumes alterity under the power of calculation”. Richard Beardsworth, ‘In Memoriam Jacques Derrida: The Power of Reason’, *Theory and Event*, 8.1 (2005), <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v008/8.1beardsworth.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v008/8.1beardsworth.html)> [accessed January 11th 2011], (para. 31 of 50).

certain future or to-come [*avenir*] of reason that resists the *teleological* unity of reason”.<sup>29</sup> This fragmented concept of reason is not synonymous with calculation but exhibits a dynamic relationship between calculation and the incalculable.

This relationship becomes evident in ‘Faith and Knowledge’, which is preoccupied with counting, accounting and calculation. The speaker expresses a desire to be “able to measure up” (45), insists upon the need for “a calculable programme” (47), and the text itself consists of rigorously numbered sections written in a “quasi-aphoristic form” (76), chosen “as one chooses a machine” (76). Furthermore, the text dramatises its own mechanical and systematic movements. In its preoccupation with counting, the text allies itself with religious writing, observing that “this question of numbers obsesses, as is well known, the Holy Scriptures and the monotheisms” (90). However, the possibility of controlling by counting is now being jeopardised by movements which are increasingly difficult to quantify. Counting, Derrida stresses, has its limits.

Responding to the limitations of counting, Derrida looks to distinguish between counting and accounting. The latter, he suggests, is not restricted by calculation and economy in the way that the former is, but refers to a certain responsibility, often one which can’t be quantified. Referring to notable absences in the text- here the sustained discussion of woman and of Islam- he insists that “We ought to take this into account” (45). Similarly, in response to Kant’s claim that Christianity is “the only truly ‘moral’ religion” (50), he asks: “Are we ready to measure without flinching the implications and consequences of the Kantian thesis?” (50), before going on to suggest that the Kantian mode is insufficient to the demands of thinking religion and reason together today. This too must be taken into account. Like *Rogues*’ figure of the incomplete circle which remains open to the other, in ‘Faith and Knowledge’ the urge to measure, count and retain self identical categories is always thwarted as the mechanical itself generates difference. The division which opens up in reason between calculation and the incalculable is compared by Derrida to the two sources which comprise religion; these divisions are structurally necessary, “Because there are, for the best and for the worst, division and iterability of the source. This supplement introduces the incalculable at the heart of the calculable” (100). Derrida’s insistence on the significance of the incalculable disrupts the precedence of the calculable and its synonymy with reason. Reason, Derrida shows, is instead constituted by the

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 128.



relationship between calculation and the incalculable, a relationship which must be 'taken into account'.

Derrida argues convincingly that calculation is always contaminated or haunted by the incalculable.<sup>30</sup> This relationship is extensively described in *Rogues*, which, whilst incorporating numerous references to the incalculable, stresses the inextricability of the two terms.<sup>31</sup> Derrida explains:

Calculable measure also gives access to the incalculable and the incommensurable, an access that remains itself necessarily undecided between the calculable and the incalculable- and that is the aporia of the political and of democracy. But by the same token, by effacing the difference of singularity through calculation, by no longer counting on it, measure risks putting an end to singularity itself, to its quality or its nonquantifiable intensity. And yet the concept of measurable equality is not opposed to the immeasurable.<sup>32</sup>

Frequently regarded as oppositional, these terms are instead connected by a mutual dependence which is constitutive of reason. Such a dependence recalls the dialogical relationship which constitutes *différance* as well as the interrelation between other apparently opposed terms such as law and justice, between finite and infinite expressions of hospitality and between the two 'truths' of democracy as discussed in *Rogues*. These two 'truths' are akin to the sources of religion in that one seeks to preserve sovereignty and purity through "some quasi-circular return",<sup>33</sup> and the other entails contamination, it is "the truth of the other, heterogeneity..."<sup>34</sup> The tension between the two is expressed as that between equality and freedom and is unresolvable; the two terms "are reconcilable, so to speak, only in a turning or alternating fashion, only in alternation".<sup>35</sup>

This tension or excess which disrupts conceptual self-identity is exemplified by the relationship between calculable and incalculable which forms reason. However, Richard Beardsworth argues that in recording and analysing this 'excess', Derrida's account of reason changes between his early and later works, situated first outside reason, and later, inside

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<sup>30</sup> This contamination is a consequence of *différance* as Derrida explains: "The same, precisely, is *différance* as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other", Derrida, 'Différance', pp. 1-27 (p. 17).

<sup>31</sup> References to the incalculable: "bottomless gratitude" (p. 2) and the "excessive gift" (p. 4) amongst others, and emphasising the importance of the "incalculable *perhaps*" (p. 5). All references to Derrida, *Rogues*.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 10. This motif of the circle also appears in relation to the economic in *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* as Derrida asserts "The figure of the circle is obviously *at the center*, if that can still be said of a circle. It stands at the center of any problematic of *oikonomia*, as it does of any economic field" (p. 6). He goes on to describe the gift as "That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry" (p. 7).

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 24.

reason. Beardsworth maintains that this excess assumes religious overtones in Derrida's later work, becoming "an archi-originary 'promise' or 'faith' that forms, for Derrida, the common source of both faith and reason, both religion and science".<sup>36</sup> Beardsworth associates this increasingly religious stance with the political positions which become explicit in the later work, for example, Derrida's espousal of a 'democracy to come'. For Beardsworth, the connection between the two is most clearly expressed in *Rogues*, a text which, he argues, shifts the excess to which reason is always bound, from being an external other to an internal element, constitutive of reason, "an auto-delimitation that divides reason from itself".<sup>37</sup> This, he claims, is a tactical shift in Derrida's thinking, a response to a disjunction between "his [Derrida's] quasi-categorical account of law and singularity and the immediate needs of reason within the world".<sup>38</sup> Derrida has realised, Beardsworth suggests, that if reason is self-critical and self-limiting, then it cannot unequivocally ally itself with the hegemonic power.<sup>39</sup> This is similar to Žižek's critique, discussed in the 'Dialogue' chapter, as both critics claim that Derrida imposes a retrospective limit on deconstruction, here guised as internal to reason, in order to safeguard deconstruction's ethical and political significance. Other critics are divided as to whether this excessive element which interacts with reason is external, internal, or, as Beardsworth claims, changes from one to the other. Julie Candler Hayes maintains that the excess is external, asserting that "Reason reasons and this is the source of its identity, its sovereign self-sameness- but to make reason see reason, it must be 'reasoned with': questioned, subjected to ongoing critique, engaged in an ongoing dialogue with that which comes from without."<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, John Caputo responds to Derrida's assertion of the significance of the incalculable and records reason's internal instability:

Reason is a movement back and forth between the incalculable and the calculable, calculating always in the face of the incalculability, keeping calculability open to the incalculable. While the irrational for Kant lay in allowing reason to be overcome by something other, reason for Derrida is precisely defined by its openness to the other,

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<sup>36</sup> Beardsworth, 'In Memoriam Jacques Derrida', (para. 31 of 50).

<sup>37</sup> Derrida cited in Beardsworth, 'In Memoriam Jacques Derrida', (para. 32 of 50).

<sup>38</sup> Beardsworth, 'In Memoriam Jacques Derrida', (para. 33 of 50).

<sup>39</sup> Beardsworth observes that this positive account of reason sets him apart from his contemporaries, who consider only reason's "subsumption of difference". Instead, Derrida perceives its conceptual barriers as points of potential openness, asserting "the necessity of the concept to apprehend what lies beyond it in the first place". This can be seen in the mutual dependence of oppositions such as law and justice or finite and infinite hospitality, where one term is irreducibly excessive. Beardsworth, 'In Memoriam Jacques Derrida', (para. 31 of 50).

<sup>40</sup> Julie Candler Hayes, 'Unconditional Translation: Derrida's Enlightenment-to-Come', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40.3 (2007), 443-455 (p. 452).

to the event, to the future, its desire for the incalculable and the unconditional, for the promise... Derrida's idea of reason is marked by faith, by a faith in reason that belongs to an 'Enlightenment to come' (*Voyous* 167), so that the distinction between faith and reason remains porous.<sup>41</sup>

However, Caputo's perception of a shift in the meaning of reason from Kant to Derrida diverges from Derrida's own position, which traces his own understanding of reason-as the relationship between calculation and the incalculable- back to the Enlightenment, asserting that: "a rational and rigorous incalculability presented itself as such in the greatest tradition of rationalist idealism. The rationality of the rational has never been limited, as some have tried to make us believe, to calculability..."<sup>42</sup> This is reinforced by Hent de Vries, who claims that "one can easily find passages where Kant seems forced to admit that the derailment accompanies philosophy from its first origin and, in a sense, constitutes it from within".<sup>43</sup> Such critical differences illustrate the complexity of reason's relationship with its external and internal others, undermining Beardsworth's claim that a distinct and politically motivated turn occurs. Further, disagreement as to whether the excess is internal or external to reason is created because Derrida shows that both are true. Like other concepts in Derrida's work, the tension is both internal and external as Derrida challenges simplistic conceptions of interiority and exteriority. Undermining Beardsworth's claim of a shift in *Rogues*, Derrida's 1994 text *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money* insists that reason's excess is both internal and external:

Linked to the double bind... this madness is all the more maddened and maddening that it besieges reason at its two borders, so to speak, from the inside and the outside. It is at once reason and unreason because it also manifests that madness of the rational logos itself, that madness of the economic circle the calculation of which is constantly reconstituted, logically, rationally, annulling the excess that itself, as we underscored at the end of the preceding chapter, entails the circle, makes it turn without end, gives it its movement, a movement that the circle and the ring can never comprehend or annul. Whence the difficulty in knowing whom and what one is talking about. Is madness the economic circulation annulling the gift in equivalence? Or is it the excess, the expenditure, or the destruction?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> John D. Caputo, 'Without Sovereignty, Without Being: Unconditionality, The Coming God, and Derrida's Democracy to Come', in *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology*, ed. by Clayton Crockett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), pp. 137-156 (p. 147).

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> De Vries, p. 368.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 36-7.

This element of ‘madness’ or incalculability destabilises reason’s self-identity, distancing Derrida’s understanding of reason from the deified, self-identical concept of reason which developed from certain strands of Enlightenment thought. In this way, through the ‘Enlightenment to come’, which is rooted in this non-identical concept of reason, Derrida can think the Enlightenment otherwise, retaining yet reworking its emancipatory aims. Further, as Derrida explains in a 1988 interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, the element of incalculability is a prerequisite for any ethical or political action:

And if I speak so often of the incalculable and the undecidable it’s not out of a simple predilection for play nor in order to neutralize decision: on the contrary, I believe there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or undecidable. Otherwise everything would be reducible to calculation, program, causality, and at best, ‘hypothetical imperative’<sup>45</sup>

In the next section, I shall show how incalculability grounds Derrida’s ‘New Enlightenment’ or ‘Enlightenment to come’, a concept which both situates deconstruction in relation to the philosophical tradition and, arising from Derrida’s insistence on reason’s heterogeneity and lack of sovereignty, connects philosophy and politics, suggesting what the political implications of deconstruction might be.

### (iii) The ‘Enlightenment to Come’: Enlightenment legacies, ‘democracy to come’ and the interruptive urgency of ‘come!’

Self-consciously deriving and differing from texts by Kant and Bergson, ‘Faith and Knowledge’ foregrounds its Enlightenment heritage, investigating the various meanings of ‘Enlightenment’ and assessing deconstruction’s relationship to its philosophical predecessors. Like ‘religion’, Derrida shows that ‘Enlightenment’ is a catch-all term, and that although “Aufklärung, Lumières, Enlightenment, Illuminismo” (46) may be linked by shared imagery, all have different histories and characteristics. Derrida outlines some of these, paying particular attention to their varied relations to religion, referring, for example, to “an *Aufklärung*, whose critical force is profoundly rooted in the Reformation” (65) and to the *Lumières*, “which traverses like a single ray a *certain* critical and anti-religious vigilance” (65). In expanding on these differences, he reminds us that any perceived singularity or sovereignty in the concept of ‘Enlightenment’ is fictive, and advocates a new

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<sup>45</sup> Derrida, “‘Eating Well’, or the Calculation of the Subject”, trans. by Peter Connor and Avital Ronell in *Points*, pp. 255-287 (p. 273).

appreciation of its plurality. As Hent de Vries describes, “Whenever and wherever there is to be Enlightenment, Derrida tells us, it will always be (will always have been) in the form of *ellipses*, that is to say, in the irreducible and infinitely reaffirmable form(s) of Enlightenments”.<sup>46</sup> This idea of the Enlightenment as both divided and unfinished will provide the scope for the ‘Enlightenment to come’.<sup>47</sup> Such an Enlightenment will also be alert to the links between reason and religion, through for example their shared imagery, which connects “the light of revelation and the light of Enlightenment” (77), as the ‘proper’ meaning of God is “‘luminous’ and ‘celestial’” (46). Being neither priest nor anti-religious philosopher, Derrida’s own task is to respond and interpret this illumination, “**to think religion** in the daylight of today without breaking with the philosophical tradition” (77).

‘Faith and Knowledge’ both reiterates and revolutionizes Enlightenment positions, methods and gestures, particularly through its relationship with Kant, with the speaker asking: “What would a book be like today which, like Kant’s, is entitled *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone?*” (48) Derrida looks to reveal the ‘unthought’ element of both Kant and Bergson’s texts (76), exchanging a dominant position for the margins, both in its focus on religion *at* the limits, rather than *within* them, and its interest in the parerga on the peripheries of Kant’s text, which “situate perhaps the fringe where we might be able, today, to inscribe our reflections” (52). Thus, Derrida’s position immediately differs from Kant’s; as Kevin Hart observes, “There will be no attempt to position himself at the very source of law, as Kant does, to enclose all discourse within the gaze of a philosopher-judge”.<sup>48</sup> A stylistic difference is evident too, with Derrida rejecting the authoritative and systematic inscription of knowledge required by the treatise genre in favour of performativity, digression, and generic contamination. The text’s “multiplicity of voices, of gestures”<sup>49</sup> would avoid both the fetishization of reason and the way forms of Enlightenment reason are, as Christopher Norris observes, “compromised by virtue of their long association with instituted structures

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<sup>46</sup> De Vries, p. 361.

<sup>47</sup> Despite divergent positions in their work more generally, here Derrida’s idea of the Enlightenment as unfinished resonates with the thought of Jürgen Habermas. Perceiving the “project of modernity”, as instantiated by Enlightenment thinkers, as the attempt “to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” and to use this knowledge “for the rational organization of everyday social life” (p. 103), Habermas insists that “instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity”, and endeavour to recuperate the legacy of the Enlightenment. Jürgen Habermas, ‘Modernity- an Incomplete Project’, in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (Harlow: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 98-109 (p. 106).

<sup>48</sup> Hart, ‘Kingdoms of God’, pp. 142-170 (p. 155).

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘In Discussion with Christopher Norris’, in *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, Catherine Cooke and Andrea Papadakis (London: Academy Editions, 1989), pp. 71-5 (p. 75)

of authority”.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, although it rejects restrictive conditions, Derrida’s ‘Enlightenment to come’ would be first and foremost a ‘yes’ to the opening of unknowable possibilities.

Critics such as Richard Terdiman interpret Derrida’s later references to the Enlightenment as an indication of a shift in his work. Terdiman asserts: “It’s as if Derrida found himself shipwrecked on the island of the Enlightenment- relieved to have fetched up on dry land, but astonished that it should be *that* land which saved him”.<sup>51</sup> However, Terdiman’s position overlooks both Derrida’s consistent ambivalence towards the Enlightenment, his demonstration that reason juxtaposes the calculable with the incalculable, and his depiction of the Enlightenment, as Julie Candler Hayes observes, “as self-reflexive critique”.<sup>52</sup> The Enlightenment, as a self-critical tradition, an unfinished and unfinishable critical project, naturally feeds into the self-questioning methods of deconstruction. Despite philosophical differences, these methodological similarities prove crucial; in fact Derrida’s shift from specific Enlightenment claims and positions renders his work consistent with a certain Enlightenment legacy. Considering his relationship with the Enlightenment, Derrida reveals:

Of course I am in favour of the Enlightenment... But at the same time I know that there are certain historical forms of Enlightenment, certain things in this tradition that we need to criticise or deconstruct. So it is sometimes in the name of, let us say, a *new* Enlightenment that I deconstruct a given Enlightenment<sup>53</sup>

This ‘deconstruction’ stresses the limitations of critique, which, he argues, cannot itself be a point of exemption from critical questioning. In *Without Alibi*, he explains:

When I say ‘more than critical’, I have in mind ‘deconstructive’... I am referring to the right to deconstruction as an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only about the history of the concept of man, but about the history even of the notion of critique<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Christopher Norris, ‘Versions of Apocalypse: Kant, Derrida, Foucault’, in *Apocalypse Theory and the End of the World*, ed. by Malcolm Bull (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 227-249 (p. 240).

<sup>51</sup> Richard Terdiman, ‘Determining the Undetermined: Derrida’s “University Without Condition”’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40.3 (2007), 425-441 (p. 427).

<sup>52</sup> Candler Hayes, 443-455 (p. 450).

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, ‘In Discussion with Christopher Norris’, pp. 71-5 (p. 75).

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 204. See also Derrida’s aspiration towards “An analysis which is not merely a theoretical analysis, but at the same time another writing of the question of Being or meaning: deconstruction is also a manner of writing and putting forward another text... The authority of judgment or of the critical evaluation is not the final authority for deconstruction. Deconstruction is also a deconstruction of critique. Which does not mean that all critique or all criticism is devalued, but that one is trying to think what the authority of the critical instance signifies in history- for example in the Kantian sense but not only in the

Elsewhere, in *Points*, he describes what this deconstruction of critique might entail:

The *critical* idea, which I believe must never be renounced, has a history and presuppositions whose deconstructive analysis is also necessary. In the style of the Enlightenment, of Kant, or of Marx, but also in the sense of evaluation (esthetic or literary), *critique* supposes judgment, voluntary judgment between two terms; it attaches to the idea of *krinein* or of *krisis* a certain negativity. To say that all this is deconstructible does not amount to disqualifying, negating, disavowing, or surpassing it, of doing the *critique of critique* (the way people wrote critiques of the Kantian critique as soon as it appeared), but of thinking its possibility from another border, from the genealogy of judgment, will, consciousness or activity, the binary structure, and so forth. This thinking perhaps transforms the space, and, through aporias, allows the (non-positive) affirmation to appear, the one that is presupposed by every critique and every negativity.<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, this deconstructive response to critique is not an ever more formalised and programmatic critique, but is rather a thinking of grounds, an affirmation, and an insistence on the need to respond to specificity and singularity. Deconstruction highlights the limits of the programmatic, demonstrating that undecidability is inescapable. Such undecidability describes the relationship between calculation and the incalculable which constitutes reason and cannot be resolved dialectically. Derrida explains:

Calculable measure also gives access to the incalculable and the incommensurable, an access that remains itself necessarily undecided between the calculable and the incalculable- and that is the aporia of the political or of democracy... the concept of measurable equality is not opposed to the immeasurable.<sup>56</sup>

For Derrida, the irresolvable co-dependence of calculation and the incalculable within reason undermines reason's sovereignty and renders it both unpredictable and interminable. A reasoned or reasonable act is not determined by calculation alone; rather, "What is 'reasonable' is the reasoned and considered wager of a transaction between these two apparently irreconcilable exigencies of reason, between calculation and the incalculable".<sup>57</sup> It is reasonable, Derrida here argues, to consider the limitations of reason itself, as well as its opening onto the incalculable which can't be known, named, figured or codified. Julie

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Kantian sense," Jacques Derrida, "'There is No *One* Narcissism" (Autobiophotographies),' trans. by Peggy Kamuf in *Points*, pp. 196-215 (p. 212).

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, 'A "Madness" Must Watch Over Thinking', in *Points*, pp. 339-364 (p. 357).

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 52.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 151.

Candler Hayes casts the ‘Enlightenment to come’ as the “middle way”<sup>58</sup> between unconditional sovereignty and complete, irrational openness. However, the ‘to come’ is not a balanced interaction between calculable and incalculable, rather it is an unknowable and unpredictable “opening to the future or to the coming of the other” (56) which betrays the influence of religion on Derrida’s work. Neil Saccamano claims that “the difficulty for Derrida is to think religion today in the spirit of Enlightenment without relying, however, solely on the demystifying aims of rational critique”.<sup>59</sup> Yet Saccamano underplays the contamination between reason and religion in Derrida’s work. Derrida’s ‘Enlightenment to come’ is propelled by a religious element; it is an act of faith which “permits a ‘rational’ and universal discourse on the subject of ‘religion’” (56).<sup>60</sup>

Derrida’s ‘Enlightenment to come’ is highly politicised and links to his understanding of the ‘democracy to come’. The former inherits, incorporates and reworks the emphasis on the “enlightened virtue of public space” and the task of “emancipating it from all external power” (47). In ‘The University Without Condition’, Derrida argues that “This reference to public space will remain the link that affiliates the new Humanities to the age of Enlightenment”.<sup>61</sup> It is this reference to public space, and the concept of reason as an ‘unconditional rationalism’ yoking together together conditional and unconditional which links the ‘democracy to come’ to this ‘Enlightenment to come’. As Derrida asserts in *Rogues*, the relationship between finite and infinite conditions the political horizon of deconstruction. He declares:

deconstruction, if something of the sort exists, would remain above all, in my view, an unconditional rationalism that never renounces- and precisely in the name of the Enlightenment to come, in the space to be opened up of a democracy to come- the possibility of suspending in an argued, deliberated, rational fashion, all conditions, hypotheses, conventions and presuppositions and of criticizing unconditionally all conditionalities, including those that still found the critical idea, namely those of the *krinein*, of the *krisis* of the binary or dialectical decision or judgment.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Candler Hayes, 443-455 (p. 449).

<sup>59</sup> Saccamano, 405-424 (p. 407).

<sup>60</sup> This religious element is, perhaps, however, overstated by James K. A. Smith, for whom Derrida’s reason becomes “a passionate reason that bears affinity to the madness of (fearful, trembling) Abrahamic faith,” James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 88.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 205. Like ‘Faith and Knowledge’, Derrida’s discussion of the future of the university in this essay aims to “link in a certain way faith to knowledge” (p. 209) by exposing the dependence of all knowledge on a certain performative element. Again, the text is highly performative; “This will no doubt be *like* a profession of faith” (p. 202), Derrida states.

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 142.



This interaction between the ‘Enlightenment to come’ and the ‘democracy to come’ may illuminate the complex and dynamic relationship between theory and practice in Derrida’s work, as well as revealing deconstruction’s political significance. Julie Candler Hayes detects a changing relationship between the two terms, with the former increasingly aligned with the latter. She argues:

It thus seems clear that in the decade following the publication of *Spectres*, the ‘democracy-to-come’ exercised a gravitational pull on the ‘New Enlightenment’, shifting the focus from the historical, however idealized Enlightenment, that might be renewed or continue to inspire action in the present, to an ahistorical Enlightenment situated in the never-fully-present *à-venir* even as it continues to bear the trace of the historical moment.<sup>63</sup>

Candler Hayes here hesitates to claim that the ‘Enlightenment to come’ is transcendentalized, however, her allegation of its ‘ahistorical’ nature seems to miss the increasingly pressing political demands it makes on us as a consequence of its association with the ‘democracy to come’. Rather than severing it from history, this connection renders the Enlightenment alive and dynamic; as Hent de Vries insists: “Enlightenment no longer coincides with ‘itself’, nor can it be put to rest in a historical archive”.<sup>64</sup> This connection is again reinforced in *The Politics of Friendship*.

Is it possible, in assuming a certain faithful memory of democratic reason and reason *tout court*- I would even say, the Enlightenment of a certain Aufklärung (thus leaving open the abyss which is again opening today under these words) -not to found, where it is not longer a matter of *founding*, but to open out to the future, or rather, to the ‘come’, of a certain democracy?<sup>65</sup>

If Candler Hayes undervalues the urgency of the ‘to come’, it is perhaps because the phrase invokes a certain deconstructive double perspective, requiring that we think both in terms of the specificity of a concrete temporal horizon- a singular, seemingly finite problem or question- and in terms of the continuous and infinite work of deconstruction, that of rewriting the differences repressed by larger forces, and enabling a constantly renewed “opening to the future or to the coming of the other” (56). This double aspect is explored through the spatial motif of the Promised Land, which bridges between promise and

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<sup>63</sup> Candler Hayes, 443-455 (p. 445).

<sup>64</sup> De Vries, p. 360.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), p. 306.

practice, transcendence and empiricism, defying Bradley's critique of an "empirical deficit"<sup>66</sup> in Derrida's later work. The Promised Land represents "the essential bond between the promise of place and historicity" (48); it emerges within history yet disables historical closure and linearity, and its significance can never be exhausted or fully explained.<sup>67</sup> This unhistoricisable core, which emerges historically yet can never be resolved within history means that for Derrida, the historicity of religion is "historicity of history- and the eventfulness <événementialité> of the event as such" (48). This determines the nature of history, and, Samir Haddad explains, of Derridean inheritance:

while it remains that an aporia is inherited from the past, the fact that there will always be a remainder, an excess beyond all mastery, entails that this aporia is also always still to come, given over to the future. That which we inherit is always behind us and before us, for it can never be located fully, once and for all, in a present, be it a present past, present, or future.<sup>68</sup>

The 'a-venir' is a radical opening to that which can never become fully present; as Derrida says of the democracy to come in *Rogues*: "democracy will never exist... not because it will be deferred but because it will always remain aporetic in its structure".<sup>69</sup> One should not attempt to condition its arrival as "the absence of horizon conditions the future itself. The emergence of the event ought to puncture every horizon of expectation" (47). Nevertheless, this very 'impossibility' of the 'democracy to come' means that one "should force oneself to achieve it".<sup>70</sup> This urgency of the 'to come', the fact that despite partaking in "some sort of *iterability*" (83) it always entails a singular call or demand and thus marks "the intersection of repetition and the unforeseeable"<sup>71</sup> is explored through the figure of the imperative 'come!' or 'veni' which Derrida considers in *Rogues* and other texts. He describes: "a call might thus be taken up and take hold: the call for a thinking of the event *to come*, of the democracy *to come*, of the reason *to come*. This call bears every hope, to be sure, although it remains, in itself, without hope".<sup>72</sup> Despite its religious resonances, Derrida insists that

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<sup>66</sup> Bradley, 'Derrida's God', 21-42 (p. 32).

<sup>67</sup> See also Derrida's discussion of khôra (here chora), that which is both within and without history, an originary 'taking place' of "the place of absolute exteriority" (p. 57) which can only be conceptualized spatio-temporally and yet "remains absolutely impassible and heterogeneous to all the processes of historical revelation or of anthropo-theological experience" (p. 58).

<sup>68</sup> Samir Haddad, 'Inheriting Democracy to Come', *Theory and Event*, 8.1, (2005)

<[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v008/8.1haddad.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v008/8.1haddad.html)> [accessed 18th January 2011] (para. 22 of 39).

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. xii.

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. xv.

this call or 'come!' remains heterogeneous to "the economy of redemption".<sup>73</sup> As Hent de Vries explains, it is "Neither immanent or transcendent (or, in a sense, both immanent and transcendent), it is an order or imperative as though it were not one".<sup>74</sup> This figure of the 'come!' is foregrounded in 'On an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Arisen in Philosophy',<sup>75</sup> another text in which Derrida responds to Kant. I shall briefly discuss the subversive effect of this 'come!' which marks interruption and alterity without territorializing them.

Regarded by Christopher Norris as "a profoundly ambivalent essay,"<sup>76</sup> 'Apocalyptic Tone' constructs a double reading of Kant's critique of the 'mystagogues' in the polemical late essay 'On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy'.<sup>77</sup> Unlike Kant, Derrida both distances himself from the 'apocalyptic tone' and acknowledges an "elective affinity"<sup>78</sup> between it and deconstruction. The former is linked to the recurring figure of the 'Come!' in the text through echoes of St. John's Apocalypse, and through the significance of tone. Here, 'come!' is located at the intersection between event and machine, repetition and iterability; as Derrida insists: "the drama of its citationality was what mattered to me at the outset, its repetitive structure and what, even in a tone, must be able to be repeated, thus mimicked, indeed "synthesized"". <sup>79</sup> The 'come!' is "a pure differential vibration"<sup>80</sup> which precedes ontology;<sup>81</sup> defying representation, it "could not become an object, a theme, a representation, or indeed a citation in the current sense".<sup>82</sup> However, its "singularity remains at once absolute and absolutely divisible"<sup>83</sup> and it partakes in the categories and classifications which it nonetheless exceeds. For Derrida, this 'come!' interrupts chronology,

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. xv.

<sup>74</sup> De Vries, p. 395.

<sup>75</sup> Derrida asserts: "For want of time, I shall limit myself to the word, if it is a word, and to the motif 'Come'", Jacques Derrida, 'On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy', trans. by John Leavey Jr., in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 117-171 (p. 162).

<sup>76</sup> Christopher Norris in 'In Discussion with Christopher Norris', pp. 71-75 (p. 75). This is reinforced by Derrida who affirms: "It is a very, very ambivalent essay", Derrida, 'In Discussion with Christopher Norris' pp. 71-5 (p. 75). See also Michael Thomas, *The Reception of Derrida: Translation and Transformation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 119-120.

<sup>77</sup> Editor Peter Fenves asserts that, of all of Kant's texts, "none is more biting, none more sarcastic, none so wholly satirical as the one written against certain Christianizing Platonists who granted feelings and sentiments a cognitive status" Peter Fenves, 'Introduction: The Topicality of Tone', in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy*, as before, pp. 1-48 (p. 1). For a discussion of Kant's rejection of mysticism see: Emil L. Fackenheim, *The God Within: Kant, Schelling and Historicity*, ed. by John Burbidge (London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>78</sup> Norris, 'Versions of Apocalypse', pp. 227-249 (p. 235).

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 162).

<sup>80</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 151).

<sup>81</sup> He admits: "This 'Come' - I do not know what *it is*, not because I yield to obscurantism, but because the question "what is" belongs to a space (ontology, and from it the knowledge of grammar, linguistics, semantics and so on) opened by a 'come' come from the other" Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 166).

<sup>82</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 165).

<sup>83</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 165).

narrative and other structures of meaning by signifying at the level of tone rather than reference.

The significance of tone is explored by the text's editor, Peter Fenves, who asserts: "The chronic vibrations to which the human mind is exposed make themselves known with the greatest clarity, moreover, at the precise moment that cognitive discourse- 'mathematical' language in a broad sense- exhausts itself".<sup>84</sup> Fenves claims that tone makes it possible to "dissociate 'language' from *logos*",<sup>85</sup> a proposition which links the 'come!' to Derrida's espousal of a 'post writing' which disrupts logocentrism. Further, according to Fenves, tone cannot be subsumed by the language of calculation,<sup>86</sup> thus reinforcing Derrida's emphasis on the incalculable as that which grounds both a certain understanding of reason and assures the possibility of an Enlightenment and a democracy 'to come'. Tone designates "an insensible- unmeasurable if not immense- dimension of discourse. The term thus traverses the cleft separating the sensible from the intelligible".<sup>87</sup> The 'Come!' always interrupts self-identity, sovereignty and homogeneity, presenting an opening towards the Other: it "breaks in [*fait effraction*]",<sup>88</sup> triggers an "overturning of sense"<sup>89</sup> and is "plural in itself, in oneself".<sup>90</sup> It is "absolutely derivable, but only from the other".<sup>91</sup> For Derrida, this relationship between interruption and Otherness, examined in texts such as 'At this very moment in this work here I am', takes place within language, disrupting conceptions of interior and exterior, and self and other, and the structures of power which depend on them. As Derrida describes, "there, near but infinitely distanced, the dislocation is to be found in the interior without inside of language which is yet opened out to the outside of the wholly other".<sup>92</sup> 'Apocalyptic Tone' theorises the significance of the 'come!', its functioning at the level of

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<sup>84</sup> Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 4-5).

<sup>85</sup> Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 26).

<sup>86</sup> "This newly overheard language of an outstanding pathos, is incommensurable with the language of measurement, schematization, counting, cognition, and representational thought in general.," Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 8).

<sup>87</sup> Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 11). In this process, "Nothing is left of language but its emphasis", Fenves, p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 168).

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 167).

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 167).

<sup>91</sup> Derrida, 'Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 117-171 (p. 166).

<sup>92</sup> Derrida, 'At this very moment in this work here I am', trans. by Ruben Berezdivin in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Indiana University and Athlone Press, 1991), pp. 11-48. Simon Critchley offers an astute reading of the text's mode of 'double reading' in the same volume; see Simon Critchley, "'Bois"- Derrida's Final Word on Levinas', in *Re-reading Levinas*, as before, pp. 162-89. For a more extensive account of the disruption of the boundary between interior and exterior, see Jacques Derrida, 'Living On', trans. by James Hulbert in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 62-142 (p. 100-101).

tone, and subsequent disruption of assumed categories, oppositions and concepts,<sup>93</sup> and its inescapable relation to interruption and alterity. Derrida's text both repeats and differs from Kant's text. The Kantian position is grounded in the *ego cogito* which guarantees the discrete identities of self and other, and provides a position from which "to *stop* listening to the other and to hear, once again, oneself: to hear, according to the terms Kant employs, the altogether clear and intimate voice of reason, not that of an enigmatic 'oracle'".<sup>94</sup> Yet, following the realisation that "no one can decide who is speaking when reason raises its voice..."<sup>95</sup> Derrida shows that there can be no clear distinctions between self and other, or reason and unreason. As a consequence, the 'come!' figures as a necessary openness to that which is unknown and incalculable, be it a "a 'divine' Other"<sup>96</sup> or a monstrosity. This imperative of the 'come!' challenges sovereignty and closure, resonating within Derrida's understanding of 'Enlightenment to come,' particularly through the connection he establishes between reconfigured concepts of reason and religion through faith or unconditionality. In the next section, I shall return to this relationship in 'Faith and Knowledge,' arguing that the link between this account of religion and Derrida's understanding of God remains surprisingly undertheorised.

#### (d) From Religion to God: Derrida's Suspension of God

'Faith and Knowledge' contains many elements which contribute towards the wider exploration and understanding of religion in Derrida's later work. These elements include Derrida's careful and lengthy examination of the concept of 'religion', his demonstration that our context is already religious, and his questioning of the contemporary phenomena of 'religion' aside from their empirical 'truth'. However, I shall argue that in thinking the limits and possibilities of religion in 'Faith and Knowledge, Derrida suspends any discussion of the question of God, so significant in other texts, and clearly a key determinant of the relations between religion, history, politics and the event. Having employed the discourse of reason in order to expose the essential contamination of calculability by the incalculable, envisaging this unknowable constituent as a space for the 'to come', Derrida seems

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<sup>93</sup> As Fenves asserts: "To hear tonality otherwise- to write in a tone and of a tone and with a tone *without the key polemical categories of inside and outside*, inclusion and exclusion- is, then, the task of Derrida's address," Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 3).

<sup>94</sup> Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 30-1).

<sup>95</sup> Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 31).

<sup>96</sup> Fenves, pp. 1-48 (p. 31).

unwilling to fully explore or theorise its implications, relating it to the 'Enlightenment to come' and to a nondogmatic religiosity, despite its clear connection to Derrida's reconfiguration of the divine in other texts. In this section, I shall examine the virtual absence of 'God' in 'Faith and Knowledge', analysing the way Derrida both demands and suspends the term, and arguing that it is the undeclared supplement to religion, enabled by Derrida's recasting of reason, and suspended as a consequence of Derrida's primarily political focus in the text.

To follow Derrida's argument requires that we at least accept that "religion has the slightest relation to what we thus call God" (65) yet Derrida does little either to examine the strengths and tensions of this dynamic relationship or to wholly absent 'God' from the text. Rather, he tries to fix the term 'God' as a synonym for religion, which results in its use as an interchangeable trope for the contemporary social and political climate, rather than having any currency or significance of its own. However, Derrida fails to efficiently suspend the signification of the term, and, in order to approach the question of religion, finds himself returning to various understandings of the concept 'God' which I shall briefly outline now. Derrida demonstrates that our structure of language demands, assumes or produces the concepts of absolute name, origin and witness which have historically contributed to the idea of God. As soon as we begin speaking of, or in the name of religion, Derrida claims:

we are confronted by the overwhelming questions of the name and of everything 'done in the name of': questions of the name or noun 'religion', of the names of God, of whether the proper name belongs to the system of language or not, hence, of its untranslatability but also of its iterability (46)

The name of God, unlike the name of religion, represents a linguistic limit, operating both within the system and referring to the origins and exterior of the system. It is defined by "its untranslatability but also, its iterability" (46) as technology both inhibits and enables singularity. God is, therefore, "unnameable in his very name" (65).

The name of God also serves as a necessary structural supplement to Derrida's understanding of 'religion as response'. Response always entails responsibility "before the other" (64) and requires a "given word" (64), yet just as there is no access to the question which precedes "the beginning of a response" (64) there appears to be no way of delineating this other. In this way, religion becomes a self-referential, automated system of responding, which cannot account for itself. This inverts the familiar structure of cause and effect as Derrida argues that God is engendered as a necessary cause or 'spectral supplement' by the

response; what must be posited, absurdly in retrospect, is “the absolute right of anteriority” (64). He states: “the oath cannot *not* produce, invoke or convoke him as already there, and therefore as unengendered and unengenderable, prior to being itself, unproducible” (65). Here, God seems to function merely as a structural placeholder distinct from historical revelation. Similarly, God is also “engendered... quasi-mechanically” (64) as the necessary element of every act of witnessing. If all knowledge demands the testimony of a witness, God, as all-seeing and omniscient, is the paradigmatic witness, and is invoked as both the one who witnesses and the one to whom we witness as well as in the very act of witnessing itself. Thus, God is “the witness as ‘nameable-unnameable’, present-absent witness of every oath or of every possible pledge” (65). This figure of God as witness is particularly relevant here, as the reliance on witnessing- always in some way linguistic- draws together reason and religion.

In addition to these brief references to a structural God, Derrida offers a frustratingly cursory consideration of the status and meaning of God within philosophy of religion and post-theistic philosophy.<sup>97</sup> He notes that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* marks a modern religion “founded on the sentiment that ‘God himself is dead’” (53), a pronouncement explored in Slavoj Žižek’s work, following Hegel, on the incarnation as the expression of a shift in God’s nature from transcendence to immanence.<sup>98</sup> However, Derrida doesn’t situate either his own work or the structural and linguistic definitions of God I explored in previous chapters within this genealogy. Even more frustrating, considering the status of Kant within the text, are Derrida’s scant expositions of Kant’s account of God, of the relationship between God and religion, and of the connections between Kant and Derrida on these issues. Derrida gestures towards the comparative irrelevance of God for Kant’s moral religion, with morality requiring that one act “as though God did not exist or no longer concerned himself with our salvation” (50), thus suspending any questions of God’s existence and nature. This Derrida links to Nietzsche’s observation of “a certain internalizing movement within Christianity” (50); he asks:

Is this not another way of saying that Christianity can only answer to its moral calling and morality, to its Christian calling if it endures in this world, in phenomenal history, the death of God, well beyond the figures of the Passion? That

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Derrida’s fleeting reference to Bergson’s claim that “the essential function of the universe... is [as] a machine for the making of gods” (77).

<sup>98</sup> “Christ’s appearance itself effectively stands for God’s death.” Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 132.

Christianity is the death of God thus announced and recalled by Kant to the modernity of the Enlightenment? (51)

Derrida doesn't pursue this line of thinking or its implications for Kant's relevance to what George E. Michalson Jr. terms "the story about post-Hegelian atheism"<sup>99</sup> despite the clear influence of Kant on Derrida's conception of God. Allen W. Wood insists that "Kant's God is, most aggressively, the God of the philosophers"<sup>100</sup> which exhibits a tension derived from Kant's scepticism of empiricist claims about God's attributes, and, common to "the whole Western tradition of orthodox rational theology" between a "detailed inventory of divine attributes" and "an extreme degree of agnosticism about the real nature of what was being inventoried".<sup>101</sup> As I have shown in earlier chapters, Derrida's dramatisation of the relationship between negative and positive theologies acknowledges and enacts this ongoing tension, as well as juxtaposing theological and philosophical accounts of God. Particularly relevant here however, with regard to the way 'Faith and Knowledge' draws together reason and religion through the alterity and incalculability of the 'to come', is the fact that for Kant, "God is a necessary idea of reason".<sup>102</sup> The rejection of revelation in favour of a certain structural account of God's identity and significance is a feature of both accounts, with Peter Byrne's claim that Kant "must construct a new understanding of what it means to talk of God"<sup>103</sup> and can therefore be understood as "a post-Christian and post-theistic thinker"<sup>104</sup> clearly recognisable from the task that Derrida himself adopts. Perhaps the most illuminative point of comparison between the two, considering Derrida's virtual expulsion of the question of God from 'Faith and Knowledge', is the connection between language about God and conceptions of subjectivity. Reiterating Byrne's claim that Kant is in some way 'post-theistic', George E. Michalson Jr. asserts that in Kant's writing, "language about God gradually becomes either redundant or a disguised version of language about ourselves".<sup>105</sup> Michalson depicts Kant's discussion of God as a precedent "for our modern notions of autonomy",<sup>106</sup> through which the transcendent characteristics of God are gradually perceived as immanent.<sup>107</sup> Michalson describes:

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<sup>99</sup> George E. Michalson Jr., *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>100</sup> Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 60.

<sup>101</sup> Allen W. Wood, p. 93.

<sup>102</sup> Allen W. Wood, p. 19.

<sup>103</sup> Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 1

<sup>104</sup> Byrne, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> Michalson, p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> Michalson, p. 9.

<sup>107</sup> Michalson, p. 20-1.



It is this Cartesian priority of self-relatedness to other-relatedness that sets the terms for our modern notions of autonomy, including the kind of intellectual autonomy at stake in the progressive theologian's uneasiness with an unbelievable religious message. For on the terms of the reflexive Cartesian scheme there can be no autonomy when some 'other' (understood now as anything distinct from my own subjectivity) relates to the self in a way that is prior to or disruptive of the self's natural relationship with itself.<sup>108</sup>

It is here that Derrida's account differs, disrupting the idea of 'modern autonomy' by demonstrating that the relationship with oneself is always mediated or disrupted. Against the claim that subjectivity has untethered itself from dependence on an external, transcendent God, Derrida exposes this myth of autonomy, reintroducing God as a name for the otherness which intrudes upon the self-relationship, challenging the political implications of autonomy which modern thinkers championed.

Bearing in mind both these points and disjunctions raised by Kant's account of God, and Derrida's revelation of the complex and multivalent nature of 'religion' in 'Faith and Knowledge', it is surprising that its references to God are limited to fleeting appeals to a structural God which is here untheorised and assumed to be synonymous with religion.

This account of God is insufficient, and the relation between religion and God- flexible, dynamic and with the potential to challenge notions of ethics and politics by questioning the divisions between experience and abstraction, and personal and public- is here undeveloped. The conception of God which we do glimpse is characteristic of Derrida's late work, yet it is divorced from its development in the work and from other conceptions of God which derive from the religious traditions he examines. In its minimal engagement with the question of 'God', the text considers only a philosophical or formal God, overlooking conceptions of God from religion, revelation and theology and neglecting to ask whether the 'return of the religious' is connected to a changing conception of God, or even to a particular 'death of God'. The text is haunted by its unaccountability to and for the spectral and ahistorical God who haunts phenomenal history and thus renders all actions impossible and unaccountable; as Derrida dramatically points out: "Everything begins with the presence of that absence" (65). Yet Derrida here neglects to theorise the significance of that 'absence', and its relationship to the religions instituted and developed on the grounds

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<sup>108</sup> Michalson, p. 9.

of divine presence. This neglect or oversight, is, I will argue, a consequence of the style and focus of 'Faith and Knowledge'.

Despite its rejection of the treatise mode in favour of that which is urgent and contemporary, "almost... a brief press release" (75), 'Faith and Knowledge' continues to engage with philosophy, contaminating idioms and genres, and with 'religion', showing how the term is transmuted and transplanted from its original Judaeo-Christian context, and illustrating its interaction with ethics, politics and economics as well as with other modes of faith and belief. Derrida's concern with 'religion now' is framed in dynamic terms: religion is that which returns and which responds, and so its grounds and implications are constantly shifting. In contrast, God is that which remains uninvestigated in the course of this discussion of religion, as if its meaning was either wholly resolved by the questions of religion or completely unrelated, Derrida apparently overlooking his own assumption that 'religion has the slightest relation to what we thus call God'. This suspension of God in 'Faith and Knowledge', one of Derrida's most politically driven texts, is perhaps a consequence of Derrida's potentially problematic depiction of God in other texts- recall Mjaaland's critique of *The Gift of Death*- in terms of interiority, subjectivity and secrecy.<sup>109</sup> In this case, Derrida's virtual silence on 'God' in 'Faith and Knowledge' implies that God is the private, personal face of the more public issue of religion, which he considers in terms of politics, community and history, and that to speak of 'God' here may destabilise or disarm Derrida's political gestures, or overemphasise his connection to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

However, the complex connection between religion and 'God', specifically a non-sovereign 'God', is integral to the "incalculable calculation of religion for our times" (79) and to notions of religion, ethics, politics and subjectivity. Without a concomitant reconfiguration of the concept of God, Derrida's argument in 'Faith and Knowledge' is ultimately unconvincing. This also has broader consequences for Derrida's work, reproducing a binary between public and private, or religion and God, which appears to be profoundly undeconstructive. In the next section, I shall examine this disjunction as it is presented by the philosopher Richard Rorty, particularly in his commentaries on Derrida's

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<sup>109</sup> At the end of Chapter Three, I argued that Mjaaland's critique could be challenged by Derrida's claims both that the interior and exterior are always contaminated, and that the concepts of interior and exterior themselves proceed from a logic and a language which he looks to subvert and rewrite through a 'post-writing', but that Derrida himself retreated from this response, leaving his work prey to Mjaaland's critique. The limited nature of Derrida's discussion of God in 'Faith and Knowledge' seems to further reinforce this critique. I shall develop my response to this critique at the end of this chapter.

work. Considering the implications of this division for religious and political readings of deconstruction, I shall offer a possible resolution of the dichotomy.

### 3. Rorty and Derrida: Resolving the Public/Private Opposition?

Derrida's neglect of the question of God in 'Faith and Knowledge' seems to reinforce the thesis- presented in different ways by Beardsworth, Bradley and Žižek- of an irrevocable split between religious and political readings of deconstruction, whilst also reinscribing this division within religion itself, as the tension between politically active religious commitment and the personal experience of faith or a 'God' whose name here refers to an interiorized experience of one's own subjectivity. The establishment or fortification of this division or tension- variously expressed in Derrida's work through oppositions including those between religion and politics, faith and religion, ethics and politics, private and public, and self and other- is uncharacteristic. Indeed such divisions are frequently challenged by deconstructive practice. In order to assess whether, as Beardsworth claims, such a tension or division prevails, both in 'Faith and Knowledge' and elsewhere, I shall examine it firstly through the presentation of separation between public and private in the work of philosopher and commentator on Derrida, Richard Rorty, and secondly, through critical responses to the relationship between ethics and politics in Derrida's work.

#### (a) Reading Rorty

##### (i) Rorty's 'Liberal Utopia'

Like Derrida, Rorty too looks to reconsider and re-articulate "the Enlightenment's promise of freedom".<sup>110</sup> However, unlike Derrida, in his book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* he urges that "we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private",<sup>111</sup> perceiving this demand to be central to the current aims of Western philosophy.

Rorty asserts that "there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory" (xiv), perceiving attempts at reconciliation as misguided or even dangerous.

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<sup>110</sup> Neil Gascoigne, *Richard Rorty: Liberalism, Irony and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 9. For an investigation of how Rorty locates his work in the trajectory of post-Enlightenment Western thought, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, rev. edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>111</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xv. Further references will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.

Instead, he envisages “a liberal utopia” (xv) which would espouse liberal values without reinscribing them as ‘truth’, offer maximum creative freedom and privacy to its individual participants, and ground itself in literature and narrative rather than philosophy and theory. For Rorty, the closest relationship between public and private that may be envisaged is their constitution of an uneasy equilibrium in which public freedom would maximally enable self creation without conceding to its own violation. Such a claim, if sustained, would uphold the critiques by Žižek and Bradley, that the religious focus of Derrida’s later work privatizes and depoliticizes deconstruction. Rorty’s claim however, must first be assessed, particularly with reference to his liberal perspectivism and to his focus on language and literature.

Rorty’s political vision develops from a liberalism for which “cruelty is the worst thing we do” (xv). Although this is a belief which, for Rorty, cannot be theoretically grounded or justified, this doesn’t diminish his commitment; rather, he foresees a ‘liberal utopia’ in which the community would look to minimize human suffering. Such a utopia would be enabled by “the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” (xvi) and by our capacity for redescription. Rorty claims that these faculties are improved by our consumption of literature, and this, he states, “is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have gradually, but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress” (xvi). An equivalent perspectivism informs Rorty’s conception of private autonomy. He rejects the conception of language as referential or representative, asserting instead that “the history of language” is “the history of metaphor” (16) and that everything is “a product of time and chance” (22). Consequently, individual autonomy would be best exhibited by the subject whose “recognition of contingency” (26) enabled complete self-creation through the creation of “a new language” (27).<sup>112</sup> Such a figure, inscribing particularity by means of a new vocabulary, is exemplified, for Rorty, by the poet. Literature and literary language inform Rorty’s visions of the public and the private, but he continually strives to separate these two realms, enlisting Freud, who “distinguished sharply between a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation” (34).<sup>113</sup> In this section, I shall examine Rorty’s understanding of a liberal community more closely, before turning to Derrida and Rorty’s application of the public/private distinction to Derrida’s work.

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<sup>112</sup> Neil Gascoigne situates this project of self-creation within an existentialist framework; see Gascoigne, p. 142.

<sup>113</sup> Such an impermeable distinction is not however, characteristic of pragmatism more generally, or even representative of all of Rorty’s work. Responding to Dewey and his influence on Rorty, Neil Gascoigne notes that “the future development of society requires that its members can fulfil their potentialities”, Gascoigne, p. 148.

Rorty suggests that historical shifts are reflected in changing vocabularies, as one vocabulary, more suited to an individual or community's needs, gradually supplants another. Here, rejecting any conception of objective truth in favour of a pragmatic appeal to use-value, he argues that "the vocabulary of Enlightenment liberalism... has become an impediment to the preservation and progress of democratic societies" and should be replaced by one "which revolves around notions of metaphor and self-creation rather than around notions of truth, rationality, and moral obligation" (44). Therefore, the resources of Enlightenment rationalism, key to the development of liberalism, are no longer required; in fact "this undermining" of the philosophical grounds of liberalism serves, for Rorty, as well as for fellow liberals Dewey, Oakeshott and Rawls, "as a way of strengthening liberal institutions" (57). Poetry here replaces philosophy for Rorty, facilitating "resdescription" (45), and enabling "culture as a whole" to be "poeticized", thus rendering the "strong poet," liberalism's "culture hero" (53). Rorty regards this preference for 'redescription' as compatible with, if not constitutive of, liberal thought, which in acknowledging "the indefinite plurality of standpoints" (51) requires practical, discursive resolutions to problems rather than a 'neutral' philosophy to adjudicate. Central to such a liberal society would be the recognition of contingency, both within the structure itself, which would be grounded in consensus rather than philosophy, and by its inhabitants, "liberal ironists" (61) who would acknowledge the contingency of their identities and moral decisions. This society, "which has no purpose except freedom" (60), is for Rorty, achievable, as he asserts "that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement," and thus, "that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs" (63).<sup>114</sup> Warning against the potentially illiberal consequences of conflating public and private aims,<sup>115</sup> Rorty nevertheless depicts redescription and self-creation as a point of similarity between public and private in a liberal society held together by a "social glue" which "consists in little more than a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of their abilities" (84).

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<sup>114</sup> Rorty regards the freedom from cruelty delivered by liberalism as sufficient compensation for its restrictive or even oppressive elements. He develops these ideas in his critique of Foucault (p. 61-6). See also Richard Rorty, 'Moral identity and private autonomy: The case of Foucault', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>115</sup> Here he urges: "Privatize the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty" (p. 63).

Set against the liberals and pragmatists to whom he turns for political guidance, Rorty delineates a tradition of thinkers or ironist theorists who are examples of self-creation. Ironist traits include a rejection of the premises of metaphysics yet a desire “to understand the metaphysical urge” (96), and the supreme aspiration towards autonomy based on the belief that “there is *nothing* more powerful or important than self-redescription” (99). Such self-description is always “narrative in form” (101) and is confronted by the problem of “how to overcome authority without claiming authority” (105). Rorty suggests that the ironist novelist responds to this problem better than the ironist theorist, as he is less tempted to inscribe his own self-creation as a new universal; therefore, “Heidegger failed where Proust succeeded” (120).<sup>116</sup> Further, Heidegger is, for Rorty, an example of why “irony is of little public use” (120), and that publically or politically, such ironists are “at best useless and at worst dangerous” (68).

It is in this ironist genealogy that Rorty situates Derrida, depicting him as Heidegger’s critics, just as Heidegger himself critiqued Nietzsche (122). In 1989, Rorty already observes a division in Derrida’s work between “an earlier, more professorial period” and later experimentation, in which his writing “becomes more eccentric, personal, and original” (123). In Rorty’s schema, Derrida’s earlier work shares too much with late Heidegger and tends towards “transcendental temptations” (129). Such issues are resolved in what Rorty considers the ‘later’ work, in his opinion, “the end product of ironist theorizing” (125). Here, Rorty argues, Derrida “privatizes his philosophical thinking” and “simply drops theory,” moving, in effect, from philosophy to irony. Consequently, for Rorty, “Derrida’s importance” lies “in his having had the courage to give up the attempt to unite the private and the public” (125), an achievement which, according to Rorty, is best illustrated by the text ‘Envois’. Rorty attests that ‘Envois’ is either focusing on the private or marginal, the latter as an example of the former,<sup>117</sup> or it is engaged in the “reduction of public to private productions” (130). Consequently, ‘Envois’ can best be understood as the reinscription of certain philosophical problems within the private realm, in which they no longer have universal significance or make transcendental claims. For Rorty, this gesture

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<sup>116</sup> As Lorenzo Fabbri observes, Derrida’s dismissal of Rorty’s idolization of Proust can be found in ‘Circumfession’ where he points out “the grimace of a good taste naïve enough to believe that one can efface the labor of theory, as if there wasn’t any in Pr., and mediocre theory at that, to believe that one must and above all that one can efface the price to be paid... I admit that I write with the price on,” Jacques Derrida, cited in Lorenzo Fabbri, *The Domestication of Derrida: Rorty, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*, trans. by Daniele Mani and ed. by Vuslat Demirkoparan and Ari Lee Laskin (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 52.

<sup>117</sup> Rorty argues that “Nothing is more private than a love letter” (p. 126) and suggests that Derrida has shifted emphasis “to what has hitherto been treated as marginal” (p. 131).

and Derrida's emphasis on particularity, prove that he has progressed beyond the philosophical preoccupation with truth, universality, reason and argumentation.

This is a controversial account of Derrida, delivering a decisive solution to the tension between public and private that 'Faith and Knowledge' seems unable to resolve. In responding to that particular text, Rorty would perhaps dismiss its attempts at political intervention as misguided, suggesting that the tension arises because Derrida has, like Heidegger before him, misunderstood the scope and significance of his own work. Furthermore, in sacrificing specificity in favour of political analysis, Rorty might add, Derrida adopts pre-existing vocabularies and limits the scope of his own self-creation. In order to assess the success of Rorty's resolution of the public/private opposition, and its application to Derrida's work, I will now turn to some critical attempts to clarify the relationships between deconstruction, pragmatism and politics.

#### **(ii) Critical Responses to Rorty**

Comparing deconstruction and pragmatism, Chantal Mouffe alleges that both "could provide important insights for democratic politics," although neither necessarily result in "one single type of politics".<sup>118</sup> Mouffe objects to Rorty's conception of politics, arguing that it lacks awareness of "the complexity of politics", a consequence of "his dismissal of any kind of theoretical inquiry into the nature of the political realm".<sup>119</sup> Mouffe contends that Rorty overlooks or downplays the antagonistic dimension of liberal democracy, which "consists in the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to eliminate it".<sup>120</sup> Rorty's claim that, in the 'liberal utopia', dissent would be resolved or that "disagreements might be relegated to the private",<sup>121</sup> is, for Mouffe, a misunderstanding of the political. Deconstruction highlights this error by exposing "the impossibility of establishing consensus without exclusion".<sup>122</sup> Further, by maintaining that justice can never be embodied in given institutions, deconstruction "forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive".<sup>123</sup> Consequently, for Mouffe, deconstruction is "hyperpoliticizing," by which she means: "Politicization never ceases because undecidability continues to inhabit the decision".<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Chantal Mouffe, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-12 (p. 4).

<sup>119</sup> Mouffe, pp. 1-12 (p. 6).

<sup>120</sup> Mouffe, pp. 1-12 (p. 8).

<sup>121</sup> Mouffe, pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

<sup>122</sup> Mouffe, pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

<sup>123</sup> Mouffe, pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

<sup>124</sup> Mouffe, pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

In his analysis of deconstruction and pragmatism in the same volume, Simon Critchley also focuses on the limitations of Rorty's political vision, relating in particular to its idealisation of liberal democracy. Critchley emphasises the inseparability of economic and political liberalism, and recalls "the evidence of imperialism, racism and colonialism that has always accompanied- or perhaps has always been the reality behind the cynical veneer of a legitimating discourse- the expansionism of Western liberal democracy".<sup>125</sup> Consequently, Rorty risks "political complacency,"<sup>126</sup> and a purely negative and individualist definition of freedom, as well as missing the critical potential of "public irony".<sup>127</sup> Critchley rejects both Rorty's narrative of a 'turn' in Derrida's work<sup>128</sup> and his attempts to distance himself from the Levinasian elements of Derrida's later texts.<sup>129</sup> Like Mouffe, Critchley stresses that, for Derrida, "no political form can or should attempt to embody justice",<sup>130</sup> and that deconstruction therefore rejects totalitarianisms and aligns itself with a certain kind of democracy. Although rejecting Rorty's perception of the public/private distinction in Derrida, Critchley identifies a problematic relationship between ethics and politics, asserting that "the central aporia of deconstruction... concerns the nature of this passage from undecidability to the decision, from the ethical 'experience' of justice to political action, to what we might call the moment of judgement".<sup>131</sup> I shall return to this tension at the end of the chapter. In responding to Critchley's critique, Rorty reinforces the differences between his own work and deconstruction, particularly his expulsion of theory from the realm of politics. First, he rejects Derrida's understanding of justice, asserting "I do not see the point of defining a commonly used term such as 'justice' as the name of an impossibility".<sup>132</sup> Secondly, he rejects the application of deconstructive critique to liberalism itself, insisting that "we do not need what Critchley calls 'a critique of liberal society'. We

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<sup>125</sup> Simon Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?', in Simon Critchley, *Ethics- Politics- Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 83-105 (p. 87).

<sup>126</sup> Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 83-105 (p. 88).

<sup>127</sup> Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 83-105 (p. 88).

<sup>128</sup> He does, however, observe "a change in the mode of presentation of Derrida's work, from a constative form of theorizing to a *performative* mode of writing, or in other terms, from meta-language to language". Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 83-105 (p. 96).

<sup>129</sup> In fact, he links Rorty and Levinas, asking if both are not "attempting to locate a source for moral and political obligation in a sentient disposition towards the other's suffering?" Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 83-105 (p. 98).

<sup>130</sup> Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 83-105 (p. 101).

<sup>131</sup> Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 83-105 (p. 100).

<sup>132</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Response to Simon Critchley', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, as above, pp. 41-46 (p. 41-42).



just need more liberal societies, and more liberal laws in force within each such society”.<sup>133</sup> With regard to the political, Derrida maintains that critique must be ongoing and would thus reject Rorty’s attempt to exempt liberalism.

The distinction between public and private, so fundamental to Rorty’s vision, is also problematized by Ernesto Laclau, who claims that the opposition is assumed rather than analysed and is presented, contradictorily, in both essentialist and historicist terms. Laclau describes:

If... we inscribe the distinction itself in the patchy and complex history of its production- something that any consequent pragmatist should do... the distinction itself becomes problematic and reveals itself as what it actually is- just an ideal-typical attempt at stabilizing an essentially unstable frontier which is constantly trespassed and overflowed by movements coming from its two sides: personal self-realization investing public aims, politicization of the private sphere, private aims whose fulfilment requires legal recognition, etc. Only in a tidy rationalistic world can the demands of self-realization and those of human solidarity be so neatly differentiated as Rorty wants them to be.<sup>134</sup>

Laclau here claims that Rorty is seeking solace in the philosophical domain which he has rejected, and that this division which underpins so much of Rorty’s thought, is unsustainable. One area where the distinction is both particularly unstable and persistently defended, is in Rorty’s discussion of the importance of literature.

### **(iii) Rorty and Literature**

Both literary writers and writing are privileged in Rorty’s utopia. The former, in their engagement with particularity, narrative and changing vocabularies, demonstrate an awareness of contingency which allies them with “freedom” (26), and the latter providing a fitting way of understanding the world, with history, “the history of successive metaphors” (20), and, via Freud, “every human life... a poem” (35). Here, Rorty expands the term ‘poet’ to include anyone who generates a new vocabulary, “so that Proust, Nabokov, Newton and Darwin, Hegel and Heidegger, also fall under the term” (24). The figure of the ‘poet’ is

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<sup>133</sup> Rorty, ‘Response’, pp. 41-46 (p. 45). This seems to be part of a wider rejection of the legacies of Marxism, for example see his claim elsewhere that, “there seems to be no particular reason why, after dumping Marx, we have to keep on repeating all the nasty things about bourgeois liberalism which he taught us to say”, Richard Rorty, ‘Method, Social Science, Social Hope’, in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 191-210 (p. 207).

<sup>134</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony’, in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, as above, pp. 47-67 (p. 65).

obviously central to Rorty's vision, but its position in relation to the poles of public and private, and to ethics and politics, is less than clear.

Alert to the potential for confusion, Rorty looks to divide literature into that which excels at redescription and self-creation, for example the writings of Nietzsche, Proust and Derrida, and that which may be morally and politically significant, illustrated by the work of Orwell and Nabokov. This distinction is inflexible as Rorty insists that we should "distinguish books which help us become autonomous from books which help us become less cruel" (141). However, as Rorty seems to conflate the moral with the political, this distinction becomes remarkably similar to the "moral-aesthetic contrast" (142) which he rejects so strongly. Further, it is the self-creative aspect of literature which Rorty most clearly admires and repeatedly associates with the future of liberalism, insisting that "the heroes of liberal society are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary" (60) as these figures "are protesting in the name of the society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image" (60). Here, the capacity for redescription is depicted as a feature of both self-creating individuals and of society yet Rorty rejects any connection between the two, asserting that "poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need" (37). Despite this strict division, Rorty repeatedly claims that the literature of self-creation serves a moral function, without clarifying whether morality is the fulfilment of one's political duties, the rejection of cruelty, or the expression of one's autonomy.<sup>135</sup>

Rorty urges that literary critics be regarded as "moral advisers" because "they have been around. They have read more books and are thus in a better position not to get trapped in the vocabulary of any single book" (81), however the moral function of literature seems to exceed this simple, didactic role. Rorty even ventures to suggest that the scope of literature is equivalent to the scope of morality, as the former challenges "one's sense of what is possible and important" (82). For Rorty, morality is "the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language" (59), facilitated by language and developed and challenged through literature. Thus the liberal society is "poeticized" rather than "'rationalized' or 'scientized'" (53), aiming "to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others by words, and not deeds" (60-1). Rorty inherits the idea that literary self-creation may have a moral function from Dewey

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<sup>135</sup> Gascoigne asserts that, for Rorty, following Dewey, "the only moral end is growth: specifically, the growth of the self", Gascoigne, p. 159.

who contends that “imagination is the chief instrument of the good... art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo... The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable” (69).<sup>136</sup> Rorty’s attempt to prove that literature reinforces the public/private opposition is challenged by his association of literature with morality.<sup>137</sup> On the contrary, literature is, for Derrida, a potential bridge between the public and private. In the next section, I shall first return to Rorty’s reading of Derrida, demonstrating that Rorty looks to distance himself from Derrida at this very point when Derrida focuses on language and literature, and secondly, I shall suggest how literature might provide a way of challenging Rorty’s division between public and private.

### (b) Rorty Reading Derrida

As we have seen, for Rorty Derrida is an exemplar of ironist self-creation who excels in creative autonomy yet who should be disregarded when considering social and political practice. Derrida himself unequivocally rejects Rorty’s analysis, stating: “I must say that I obviously cannot accept the public/private distinction in the way he uses it in relation to my work”.<sup>138</sup> However, this distinction, so rigorously applied in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* appears somewhat softened as Rorty writes in 1996: “to understand Derrida’s motives one must see his work against a political background- and in particular against the background of the Holocaust”.<sup>139</sup> This concession that Derrida’s work may have some political significance, or at least should not be divorced, from a historical and political context, is not however, a sign of agreement with wholly ethical or political readings of his work. Regarding Derrida as a humanist,<sup>140</sup> an exclusionary term which conflicts with

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<sup>136</sup> See also Rorty’s rather reductive claim that “the Romantic poets did not know that their purpose was to contribute to the development of an ethical consciousness suitable for the culture of political liberalism” (p. 55).

<sup>137</sup> By framing *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* as a demonstration of the theoretical incompatibility of private and public commitments, Rorty drives the reader towards counter-arguments. A more generous and generative reading is perhaps available if we instead read the text, as Neil Gascoigne advocates, as “an apologia for the resentful, self-absorbed quest of the post-philosophical intellectual to find a role for herself.” Gascoigne, p. 181.

<sup>138</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism’, trans. by Simon Critchley in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, as above, pp. 77-88 (p. 78).

<sup>139</sup> Rorty, ‘Response’, pp. 41-46 (p. 44). This coincides with Lorenzo Fabbri’s claim that “Rorty does not really refute that Derrida’s work has some bearing on public life. What he contests is the delusional belief that *exclusively* by passing through ‘theory’, one can be productively engaged with the political life of a given community”, Fabbri, p. 96.

<sup>140</sup> For Rorty, Derrida is a humanist as a consequence of his acceptance of a certain Enlightenment legacy, and in his hope that human beings “may learn to rely on their own romantic imagination, and their own ability to

Derrida's rejection of anthropocentrism, Rorty both struggles "with the specifically Levinasian strains in his [Derrida's] thought"<sup>141</sup> and continues to reject the relevance of theory for politics, which he regards as "a matter of pragmatic, short-term reforms and compromises".<sup>142</sup>

These disparities between Rorty and Derrida, linked to the political implications of deconstruction and to the very nature of the political, may also be traced back to questions surrounding Derrida's inheritance from Heidegger and, relatedly, the significance of language and literature. For Rorty, Derrida's greatest achievement is his debunking of the claim that philosophy transcends writing. Rorty asserts that "Philosophical writing, for Heidegger as for the Kantians, is really aimed at putting an end to writing".<sup>143</sup> Such writing assumes the transparency or insignificance of its medium, and its own ability to access and issue truths irrespective of the medium. For Rorty, Derrida starts from the recognition of philosophy as a type of writing, moreover, a writing which always refers to other writing. Thus, Derrida's work endeavours to answer the question: "Given that philosophy *is* a kind of writing, why does this suggestion meet with such resistance?"<sup>144</sup> Given Rorty's preference for Derrida's 'later' work, moments where Derrida appears to be making transcendental claims or 'doing philosophy' are judged as lapses as Rorty asserts: "I see the worst parts of Heidegger and Derrida as the parts which suggest that they themselves have finally gotten language right".<sup>145</sup> As becomes evident in the essay 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Language', in which Rorty compares Wittgenstein's increasingly pragmatic trajectory with the later Heidegger's gestures towards mysticism, Rorty is notably hostile towards the idea that there may be something incomprehensible or inexhaustible in language. Recalling Heidegger's famous declaration that "it is language that speaks...",<sup>146</sup> Rorty perceives both a universalising abstraction and an egotistical "hope that the thinker can avoid immersion in

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cooperate with each other for the common good", Richard Rorty, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, pp. 13-18 (p. 14).

<sup>141</sup> He continues, "In particular, I am unable to connect Levinas's pathos of the infinite with ethics or politics," also asserting that he believes Levinas to be inapplicable to "reformist, democratic politics", the only type of politics which concerns him. Rorty, 'Remarks', pp. 13-18 (p. 17).

<sup>142</sup> Rorty, 'Remarks', pp. 13-18 (p. 17).

<sup>143</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida', in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, as before, pp. 90-109 (p. 94).

<sup>144</sup> Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing', pp. 90-109 (p. 94).

<sup>145</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Pragmatism and post-Nietzschean philosophy', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, as before, pp. 1-6 (p. 5).

<sup>146</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 50-65 (p. 64).

the always already disclosed”,<sup>147</sup> hence his dislike of Derrida when such ideas leach into his work. Heidegger’s influence on Derrida’s understanding of language is palpable, yet, contra Rorty, does not tend towards mystical irrelevance. Rather, it determines the concrete conditions of deconstruction. Derrida’s observations: of the inexhaustibility of signification, or the fact that “writing does not begin”;<sup>148</sup> of the insistence of an unknowable Otherness within the same; and of the finitude of infinite difference, all constitute the non-prescriptive practices which challenge the limits and practices of ethics and politics. Rorty may present his differences with Heidegger and Derrida as philosophical, but they doubtless intersect the political. Rorty espouses a ‘liberal utopia’ which can be made present, whereas, for Derrida, as a consequence of his understanding of language and alterity, the political is that which can never be foreclosed.<sup>149</sup>

The antipathy that Rorty exhibits towards traces of Heidegger’s philosophy of language in Derrida is paralleled by a similar hostility towards Paul de Man’s approach to language. Representative of a certain type of ‘deconstructionist’ for Rorty, de Man is accused of fetishizing language or the absences it represents, thus rendering language “a way of mourning a *Deus absconditus*”.<sup>150</sup> Rorty perceives de Man’s approach to language as a perversion of Derrida’s assertion that “the sign... is deferred presence”,<sup>151</sup> and repeatedly parodies de Man, asserting for example, that “The initiates, the negative theologians, the worshippers of the Dark God whose Voice is in the Literariness of Language, are those who no longer believe that ‘language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world’”.<sup>152</sup> In his attempt to deny that this representation of de Man is derived from Derrida, he assumes an unlikely ally, citing Michael Ryan’s claim in *Deconstruction and Marxism* that Derrida’s work is not “privileging language, rhetoric or ‘literary texts’”.<sup>153</sup> Ryan’s claim, with which I shall disagree, is driven by his intention to repoliticise Derrida, here by distancing his work from the Yale School. Although any conflation of Derrida with De Man or other Yale School thinkers is an oversimplification, Rorty’s rejection of literary readings of Derrida seems odd considering both his

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<sup>147</sup> Rorty, ‘Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language’, pp. 50-65 (p. 65).

<sup>148</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, p. 11.

<sup>149</sup> This is illustrated by Rorty’s own observation that “his [Derrida’s] great theme is the impossibility of closure,” Richard Rorty, ‘Deconstruction and circumvention’, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, as before, pp. 85-106 (p. 92).

<sup>150</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Two meanings of “logocentrism”: a reply to Norris’, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 107-118 (p. 114).

<sup>151</sup> Jacques Derrida, cited in Rorty, ‘Two meanings of “logocentrism”’, pp. 107-118 (p. 115).

<sup>152</sup> Rorty, ‘Two meanings of “logocentrism”’, pp. 107-118 (p. 115).

<sup>153</sup> Michael Ryan cited in Rorty, ‘Two meanings of “logocentrism”’, pp. 107-118 (p. 116).

interpretation of 'Envois' and the privileged role of literature in his own 'liberal utopia'. Again, it seems likely that Rorty's unease towards Derrida's approach towards literature is caused by its challenge to his own political perspective. In the final part of the chapter, I shall briefly examine Derrida's relationship with literature and the literary.

### **(c) Derrida and Literature**

The significance of language, literature and textuality in Derrida's work has been a source of debate since the earliest texts; on the one hand, Yale School scholars endeavoured to claim deconstruction for literary studies, and, on the other, Michael Ryan controversially suggested that 'textuality' is simply "the name for radical heterogeneity," and "has very little if anything to do with an idealist concept like 'the literary'".<sup>154</sup> Ryan's suspicion of 'the literary' is characteristic of deconstruction, yet he understates the importance of language and literature for Derrida, as Derrida's famous interview, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature,' reveals. Here, Derrida is called to account for his claim that "my [his] most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if that is possible, has been directed towards literature, towards that writing which is called literary".<sup>155</sup> It is this interest, oddly downplayed by Rorty, considering his own focus on literature, which, I shall argue, may challenge Rorty's assumption of the private/public opposition.

Derrida gives a revealing account of his understanding of literature in 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', claiming that "literature seemed to me [him], in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to *say everything, in every way*".<sup>156</sup> For Derrida, literature is always excessive; it is "an institution which tends to overflow the institution".<sup>157</sup> It also illuminates the workings of all language; "Literature 'is' the place or experience of this 'trouble' we also have with the essence of language, with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general".<sup>158</sup> Unlike philosophy, literature doesn't aspire to

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<sup>154</sup> Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 103-4.

<sup>155</sup> Jacques Derrida, cited by Derek Attridge in 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge and trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75 (p. 33).

<sup>156</sup> Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', pp. 33-75 (p. 36).

<sup>157</sup> Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', pp. 33-75 (p. 36).

<sup>158</sup> Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', pp. 33-75 (p. 48).

universality, but is particular and idiomatic, always “an *absolutely* singular event,”<sup>159</sup> even though its singularity is always already compromised. As Derrida asserts, “there has to be this play of iterability in the singularity of the idiom. And this play threatens what it makes possible”.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, and again testament to this tension between singularity and generality, in Derrida’s work, the term ‘literature’ signifies beyond the individual literary work. As Simon Critchley describes, “The name ‘literature’ becomes the placeholder for the experience of a singularity that cannot be assimilated into any overarching explanatory schema, but which permanently disrupts the possible unity of such a schema”.<sup>161</sup> In this sense, the space of literature enacts the encounter between singular and universal, or private and public. Derrida’s repeated emphasis on the relationship between literature and public space and democracy, as well as to the singularity of literature, testifies to this juxtaposition. In the ‘Strange Institution’ interview he claims that literature, as “linked to an authorization to say everything... seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy”.<sup>162</sup> A more extensive theorization of this connection can be found in the essay ‘The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (thanks to the “Humanities”, what *could take place* tomorrow)’. Here Derrida declares:

I will call the unconditional university or the university without condition: the principal right to say everything, whether it be under the heading of a fiction and the experiment of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it. The reference to public space will remain the link that affiliates the new Humanities to the Age of Enlightenment. It distinguishes the university institution from other institutions founded on the right or the duty to say everything, for example religious confession and even psychoanalytic ‘free association’. But it is also what fundamentally links the university, and above all the Humanities, to what is called literature, in the European and modern sense of the term, as the right to say everything publicly, or to keep a secret, if only in the form of fiction.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 43). For a discussion of the nature and implications of this singularity see Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>160</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 65).

<sup>161</sup> Simon Critchley, ‘Derrida: The Reader’, in *Derrida’s Legacies: Literature and philosophy*, ed. by Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1-11 (p. 2).

<sup>162</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 37).

<sup>163</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (thanks to the “Humanities”, what *could take place* tomorrow)’, in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 24-57 (p. 26-27).

Consequently, literature, that “certain democratic institution”<sup>164</sup> is the paradigmatic democratic or deconstructive institution as it incessantly highlights its own lack of sovereignty; as Joseph Kronick attests, it is “the reserve or remainder that cannot be taken up or totalized within its institution.”<sup>165</sup>

In his Foreword to Derrida’s *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*, Martin McQuillan emphasises the link between literature and democracy, asserting that “Literature is in other words a space in which the impossibility of the democracy-to-come might be possible”.<sup>166</sup> Following Derrida’s discussion of “literature’s secret, the infinite power to keep undecidable and thus forever sealed the secret of what it/she {elle} says...”,<sup>167</sup> McQuillan affirms that “This is the genius of literature, the infinite power to keep the secret undecidable and sealed from what it says even as it is publicly avowed”.<sup>168</sup> It is this element of the secret and its relationship to literature which may present an alternative to Rorty’s ossification of the public/private distinction. In Chapter Two, I discussed Derrida’s understanding of being ‘in secret’, a phrase which refers not to a specific reserved content, but a mode of linguistic silence through which one bears witness. This conception of secrecy, I argued, is also linked to Derrida’s perception of God and subjectivity, as “God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior”.<sup>169</sup> God thus names a certain non-sovereign subjectivity, and signifies an encounter which both generates this singular subjectivity and determines that its interiority is always mediated by an otherness. This very process challenges any stable distinction between public and private, or self and other. Similarly, Derrida’s association of the secret with literature also enables a way of rethinking or destabilising these divisions. Considering Derrida’s presentation of the relationship between literature and the secret in ‘Passions’, J. Hillis Miller explains:

the freedom to say everything in literature means the right not to respond, a right to absolute non-response, to keep secret. Derrida associates this hyperbolic right to non-response with the democracy to come... Literature keeps a secret that does not have to be revealed, or rather than cannot by any means... be revealed<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Derrida, ‘The Future of the Profession’, pp. 24-57 (p. 30).

<sup>165</sup> Joseph Kronick, *Derrida and the Future of Literature* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 10.

<sup>166</sup> Martin McQuillan, ‘Foreword’, in Derrida, *Geneses*, pp. v-xv (p. vi).

<sup>167</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, p. 18.

<sup>168</sup> McQuillan, pp. v-xv (p. viii).

<sup>169</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 108.

<sup>170</sup> J. Hillis Miller, ‘Derrida and Literature’, in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, as above, pp. 58-81 (p. 65).



In 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', Derrida again reinforces the relationship between literature and democracy<sup>171</sup> before expanding on the political implications of the secret, associated with literature as "The secret of literature is thus the secret itself".<sup>172</sup> Derrida describes:

The secret is irreducible to the public realm- although I do not call it private- and irreducible to publicity and politicization, but at the same time, this secret is that on the basis of which the public realm and the realm of the political can remain open. It is on the basis of the secret that I would take up again the question of democracy, because there is a concept of politics and democracy as openness- where all are equal and where the public realm is open to all- which tends to deny, efface or prohibit the secret; in any case, it tends to limit the right to secrecy to the private domain, thereby establishing a culture of privacy (I think that this is the dominant and hegemonic tendency in the history of politics in the West). This is a very serious matter, and it is against this interpretation of democracy that I have attempted to think an experience of the secret and of singularity to which the public realm has no right and no power. Even if we take the example of the most triumphalistic totalitarianism, I believe the secret remains inaccessible and heterogeneous to the public realm. And this heterogeneity is not depoliticizing, it is rather the condition of politicization: it is the way of broaching the question of the political, of the history and genealogy of this concept, with the most concrete consequences.<sup>173</sup>

In this enigmatic passage, Derrida seems again to risk reinforcing the primacy of the individual or personal over the public. However, his aim is rather to demonstrate the interdependence of secrecy and public space, and to undermine the privatization of secrecy. For Derrida, the secret, as an instance of singularity, opens public space yet cannot be subsumed by it. Although it appears similar to privacy, the two aren't identical as the very interiority of the secret is enabled by the experience of otherness. Consequently, the secret precedes and undermines any reductive binary between public and private.

It is this element of resistance which seems to determine the political implications of both secrecy and literature. "Literary fictionality"<sup>174</sup> ensures that a text remains open, that, having no assured external meaning, it cannot be translated or foreclosed without a certain loss. This is understood as a kind of non-sovereign resistance; as Martin McQuillan

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<sup>171</sup> Derrida asserts: "I am not able to separate the invention of literature, the history of literature, from the history of democracy. Under the pretext of fiction, literature must be able to say anything; in other words, it is inseparable from the human rights, from the freedom of expression etc." Jacques Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 77-88 (p. 80).

<sup>172</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, p. 18.

<sup>173</sup> Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 77-88 (p. 80-1).

<sup>174</sup> Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 77-88 (p. 80).

describes: “the undecidable in literature refuses sovereignty its own ipseity rendering the sovereign divisible and no longer sovereign. This power is not a counter-force to the sovereign but the activity of the passive ‘what happens’ of the all-powerful, powerless other”.<sup>175</sup> Derrida recalls that this structural resistance, where the text itself undermines referential, transcendental or universal readings, is paralleled by a history of literary challenges to political and social norms. The non-sovereign power of literature, which derives from its lack of essence and self-identity, and its liminality- it “perhaps stands on the edge of everything”<sup>176</sup>- renders it remarkably similar to the figure of God in Derrida’s later work. In fact, whereas Derrida uses the term ‘literature’ to describe “this excess of language”<sup>177</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s, it seems that ‘God’ often serves a similar function in the later texts.

As we have seen, Derrida’s emphasis on the transformative power of textuality often emerges as the imperative to develop a new language, a ‘post-writing’ or ‘athetic writing’, which provides a way of thinking otherwise, a mode of thought which is not underpinned by such binary oppositions. In this way, Derrida responds to the apparent tension between public and private with two languages or voices: first, he demonstrates that the two terms, public and private co-constitute each other, and that the interior or private element is always already contaminated by that which appears to be external, and secondly, perhaps more radically, he denaturalizes the opposition between public and private, demonstrating that it issues from a philosophical logic which is not the only possible mode of thought, and instead developing a way of reading and writing which responds to singularity.

In light of this, it becomes clearer why ‘Faith and Knowledge’ presents such an undeconstructive disjunction between God and religion, or the private and the public. Whereas other texts I have analysed are anchored in close reading and therefore always return to the singularity of the text, in ‘Faith and Knowledge’, Derrida looks to address ‘reason’, ‘religion’ and ‘the political’ more directly, and in so doing fulfils Marius Timmann Mjaaland’s criticism that his work becomes less powerful, and indeed less deconstructive, when not rooted in an instance of close, textual reading.<sup>178</sup> The text, speaking through the discourse of reason, which proves itself inappropriate for speaking about God, loses touch

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<sup>175</sup> McQuillan, pp. v-xv (p. ix).

<sup>176</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 47).

<sup>177</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 48).

<sup>178</sup> Mjaaland, p. 334.

with singularity. To borrow Rorty's terminology, here Derrida, despite his exploration of the limitations of the philosophical modes of tract and treatise, is seduced by the desire to philosophise and universalise, forsaking his ironist skills of self-description and instead borrowing pre-prepared philosophical and political discourses. At times, Derrida even veers close to what Rorty regards as philosophy's cardinal error, that of assuming his mode's transparency.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Beginning with 'Faith and Knowledge', this chapter has analysed the significance of reason in Derrida's later work, particularly for Derrida's investigation of the 'return of the religious' and in his development of a deconstructive account of the political. I have argued that Derrida links together all of these elements through the 'Enlightenment to come' which, in attesting that both reason and religion require an incalculable element of faith or testimony, names a non-prescriptive vision of democracy defined by its excess over all existing social and political institutions and propelled by a desire for justice. The forceful political focus, I argued, was maintained through an understanding and investigation of religion as a contemporary, dynamic and public phenomenon, whose component of faith, although essential, and relation to God, were radically undertheorised, resulting in an apparent disjunction between God and religion, self and other, and the private and the public.

This disjunction undermines Derrida's very politics, which depends on the rethinking of subjectivity and divinity which appears in other later texts. Turning to Richard Rorty's espousal of this division, I outlined Rorty's 'liberal utopia' and its possible limitations, noting that Rorty shies away from Derrida's understanding of language and literature, as a consequence of literature's function as a bridge between the singular and the general, and its connection to secrecy as that which precedes the public/private division. Thus, I argued, Derrida's perception of literature short-circuits Rorty's reductive opposition between the political and the private. Finally, returning to 'Faith and Knowledge', I suggested that here Derrida overlooks the subversive power of re-reading and re-writing, instead adopting a philosophical discourse which makes universal claims, cannot respond to singularity and the idiom and thus reinforces certain undeconstructive binaries.

What becomes evident when considering the limitations of 'Faith and Knowledge' is the importance of language, literature and textuality for deconstruction: the fact that

literature is active, resistant and performative, and the way in which “changing language, change[s] more than language”.<sup>179</sup> In the final section of the thesis, I shall draw together the key elements that have emerged in my thesis and some of their implications, maintaining reference to the function of textuality in this process as that which enables a certain “imperative” to become both apparent and achievable.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 55).

<sup>180</sup> Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, pp. 33-75 (p. 55).

## Conclusion

Deconstruction is also a manner of writing and putting forward another text...

Jacques Derrida

### 1. Writing God

At the start of the thesis, I described my aim to track Derrida's search for a discourse which would both respond to singularity and to what is understood by 'God'. Looking to establish a link between 'God' and the modes and processes of writing, and to assess any tension between this figure of 'God' and the political emphasis of deconstruction, I focused particularly on the discourses of confession, dialogue, silence, and reason as Derrida employs and investigates them. Here I shall first recapitulate my findings before suggesting some of their wider implications.

In Chapter One, I examined 'Circumfession', a highly personal text in which Derrida explores the profoundly religious genre of confession through the structure of a 'double reading' which both re-inscribes familiar confessional gestures, and challenges or subverts them. Demonstrating the insufficiency of current readings to explain the significance of writing and of contamination, or impurity, in the text, I re-read 'Circumfession' through this 'double reading', revealing how the text both repeats and rewrites, or deconstructs, the tightly controlled economies of confessional structure, confessional subject, and the figure of God. In this chapter, I first drew attention to Derrida's declared desire to 'invent a new language' or 'syntax'. This new language, I insisted, is immediately linked to Derrida's reconception of both the subject and of God as non self-identical, and responds to the inadequacy of current discourse to conceptualise lived experience. Derrida's challenge to the accepted perception of a transcendent and omnipotent God develops from Augustine, who, for Derrida, begins to inscribe a God who is changeable and connected to the processes of writing. In turn, Derrida asserts his atheism with regard to the Judaeo-Christian God, associating 'God' with writing, dynamism, mortality and with the negotiation of subjectivity. God is something or someone to be discovered and addressed by the text, and is linked with the new language, an 'unknown grammar', as well as with an unnamed witness, and an inescapable otherness. As a consequence, I argued that Derrida's 'double

reading' of the confessional discourse, which revealed the restrictions of the confessional economy, rendered it more, rather than less, open to understanding, perceiving and addressing 'God'.

In the final part of the chapter, I turned to 'Envois', maintaining that it too promotes a 'double reading' of confession. Although fewer than those in 'Circumfession', the references to God in this text focus on God's limitations and on the negotiation between the unresolved identities of self and other. Here however, I showed that Derrida depicts confession as a process of repression and subjection, thus introducing the question of political rights and norms. 'Envois' enacts the formation of the political, negotiating between public and private, and between disorder and control, and Derrida's medium, the postcard, challenges the accepted division between interior and exterior, and its relationship to subjectivity. In this way, I argued that in 'Envois', Derrida gestures towards questions of ethics and politics and their relationship to religion, as well as to a new language or 'athetic writing', without fully exploring them.

Prior to the second chapter I turned to the critically contested relationship between deconstruction and negative theology, the latter a discourse which clearly informs Derrida's writing strategies, particularly with regard to the modes of dialogue and silence which concern Chapters Two and Three. Here I highlighted key links between negative theology and deconstruction, including their exploration of non-dialectical negativity and their use of a variety of linguistic modes and strategies.

In Chapter Two, I examined two key expressions of the dialogical mode in Derrida's work. The first of these was based upon *différance*, which, I demonstrated, consists of two apparently contrary positions or movements which are in constant dialogue with each other. Responding to assertions from Arthur Bradley and Slavoj Žižek of a distinct 'turn' in Derrida's later work, I explained that this dialogical movement which constitutes *différance* remains consistent throughout Derrida's work, emerging in later texts, for example, as the relationship between law and justice, and invalidating such claims of a 'turn'. Moving on to the significance of dialogue for Derrida's understanding of God, I proposed a reading of 'Sauf le nom (Post scriptum)'. In this text, I argued that dialogue provides a non-dogmatic way of investigating the nature of language, the concept of 'God' and the relationships between deconstruction and negative theology, and kataphatic and apophatic theologies. Paralleling the 'double reading' I perceived in 'Circumfession', the dialogical mode enables Derrida to

both replicate the gestures of negative theology, and, as Arthur Bradley writes, to repeat them otherwise. I argued that the text's exploration of the relationship between negative theology and deconstruction revealed the shared desire for a new language or 'post-writing' to express what is currently inexpressible. Such a writing would be performative, plurivocal and non-logocentric, as well as responsive to singularity and alterity. Further, for Derrida, it would enable the inscription of a non-ontotheological God, again linked to the movements and structures of textuality. The many conflicting definitions of God in 'Sauf le nom' both follow a certain tradition of negative theology, and, in looking to save God from 'idolatry', sovereignty and self-identity, give the name 'God' the potential to become a 'strategic political lever' in rethinking deconstructive politics.

At the end of the chapter, I considered this question of the political, returning to the claims of Bradley and Žižek that Derrida's disputed religious 'turn' depoliticizes deconstruction. Here I argued that their critiques were both limited by their conceptions of politics, and that Derrida's later work, including his model of a non-sovereign God and demand for a new non-logocentric discourse, destabilises the concept of the political without detracting from the need for urgent action. Finally, I gestured towards a tension- which begins to emerge through Derrida's engagement with negative theology- between the perceived interiority of experiences of negative theology and Derrida's political commitments.

In Chapter Three, I examined the discourse of silence, another mode employed by negative theology, and a complement to the dialogical mode of Chapter Two. Looking first at 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', a text preoccupied with apophaticism, I reasoned that Derrida's model of 'avoiding speaking' refers to a type of linguistic or relativistic silence. Next I stressed that such a linguistic silence here provides a way for Derrida to 'keep the promise', referring both to the specific promise that he would one day speak of negative theology, and to a more general promissory structure which he perceives as an intrinsic part of language. Such a structure, I contended, is linked to Derrida's understanding of God, an understanding, which, consistent with texts examined in previous chapters, is anchored in language. Here Derrida is preoccupied with the ontotheological recuperation of the name of 'God', but also looks again to reject 'idolatry' and to associate 'God' with the infinitude of language, and with 'the trace of the singular event that will have made speech possible'. The inscription of such a God is rendered possible, I argued, by Derrida's adoption of a

relativistic or linguistic silence, and is again connected to a new mode of writing, here 'another syntax' or, in Mjaaland's terms, an 'alternative *logos*'.

Recognising a similar linguistic silence in *The Gift of Death*, I argued that Derrida's observation of such silence in his rereading of the 'Binding of Isaac' creates and preserves a structure of secrecy which is akin to the structure of the promise in 'Denials'. Derrida's account draws upon Genesis 22 and on *Fear and Trembling*, emphasising how Abraham's linguistic silence puts him in a position of secrecy, which names a process of 'subjectivizing interiorization'. Secrecy, as a mode of non-manifestation which draws out the singularity of the subject, becomes a way of bearing witness or becoming responsible, and connects to Derrida's reconfiguration of God. Rejecting the definition of God received through scripture, Derrida here defines God both as an absolute otherness and as a structure of secrecy which generates subjectivity.

At the end of the chapter I returned to the tension raised in Chapter Two between the apparent individuality of religious experience for Derrida, and politics, a tension between interior and exterior. Challenging Mjaaland's critique of the interiority of Derrida's God by demonstrating that otherness and exteriority always permeate the interior, I then looked at this tension between interior and exterior as it is presented through the accounts of Levinas and Kierkegaard of Genesis 22. Here I traced Derrida's account of the thinkers' different perspectives on ethics and religion, and in particular, the emergence of these perspectives in his double reading of the phrase 'tout autre est tout autre', which, he suggests can be read as locating religious responsibility (understood as a singular, individual commitment) both as internal and external, to ethics. This double reading, I argued, resists any simplistic opposition between ethics and religion, or interior and exterior, exposing a constitutive otherness in the development of interiority, "the irreducible openness in the inside",<sup>1</sup> which goes some way to resolving, or at least reviewing the terms of the apparent tension. A further response, yet one which Derrida here underplays, comes in the form of 'post-writing'. Such a writing would provide a way of thinking which is not determined by the familiar, and often misleading oppositions, between interior and exterior, or private and political.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 86.



In Chapter Four, I examined Derrida's engagement with the discourse of reason, focusing mainly on the text 'Faith and Knowledge'. In the first part of the chapter I tracked Derrida's argument that reason and religion are terms which signify varied, disparate meanings, and that any animosity between the two is misplaced, as they are mutually dependent. Drawing on other texts in which Derrida considers or employs the discourse of reason, I showed that reason, for Derrida, consists of 'heterogeneous rationalities' which are constituted by a dialogical relation between calculation and the incalculable. This, I argued, forms the basis for Derrida's concept of the 'Enlightenment to come' which links together the futures of reason and politics, as well as that of religious thought, as it necessarily incorporates elements of faith, incalculability and the unknown.

Despite the sustained consideration of religion in 'Faith and Knowledge'—arguably the text in which Derrida most clearly addresses the 'return of the religious'—I argued that it virtually ignores the related question of the meaning and significance of 'God', referring to this unexplored 'God' fleetingly, and as if synonymous with religion. Addressing this problem, it became clear that the question of God is suspended in 'Faith and Knowledge' because, in its relation to interiority, it appears to conflict with the primarily political thrust of the text, a suspension, which, I contended, actually undermines the political element of Derrida's work, which is itself rooted in the concept of a God of non-sovereignty. Having already shown how Derrida's adoption of other discourses and of a 'post-writing' undermines such undeconstructive oppositions as that between interior and exterior, it seems that the discourse of reason, which reinstates such oppositions, is unsuited both to speaking about God, and to expressing the aims of deconstruction. Given that 'Faith and Knowledge' introduces a division between public and private which it does not resolve, I then turned to Richard Rorty, a thinker who both challenges philosophy's claims to primacy yet suggests that we renounce the urge to unify public and private, praising what he perceives as Derrida's separation of public and private, and his creative autonomy. Looking to challenge Rorty's account, I argued that his relationship with language and literature is problematic. Rather than illustrating the opposition between public and private as he claimed, I contested that, for Derrida, literature is that which disregards or rewrites this division, being as it is, connected to both secrecy and interiority, and democracy and public space. This function and power of literature, which develops new modes of expression, and in them, new ways of understanding the world, connects to the 'post-writing' or new language which other discourses have enabled Derrida to develop.

In the course of my readings, it became clear that some discourses are better suited than others to speaking about God or to ascertaining what the name of 'God' might mean. Although in his discussion and adoption of confession, dialogue and silence, Derrida considers the religious heritage of these discourses and their tendency towards the recuperation of an ontotheological God, all of these discourses enable Derrida to reframe 'God' outside an ontotheological structure. The mode of reason, however, proves itself unsuited to exploring the meaning of 'God', perhaps because it remains anchored in structures which perceive 'God' as inescapably metaphysical.

The figures of 'God' which Derrida outlines in the first three discourses have many similarities; all exhibit alterity, non-identity and a relationship with writing as defining features. Derrida multiplies the definitions of God however, and renders them all subtly different in order to emphasise God's non-identity, which represents a significant divergence from the Judaeo-Christian tradition whose influence he acknowledges in all of these texts. Such differences are also evident in critical responses to Derrida's 'God': David Wood tracks Derrida's understanding of God from being "a 'transcendental signified'"<sup>2</sup> to "the marker of a different ethical economy";<sup>3</sup> Steven Shakespeare foregrounds "the way in which Derrida challenges the idea of the simplicity of God";<sup>4</sup> and Rodolphe Gasché perceives the question of God to be "embedded in Derrida's texts".<sup>5</sup> Derrida repeatedly speaks of saving God from idolatry, and looks to demonstrate that the concept of 'God' and theological structures inescapably influence our conditions of experience. Rather than desecrating religious thought as politically conservative, as Richard Beardsworth does, Derrida envisages both a 'post-writing' which would liberate non-logocentric processes and structures, and a non-identical and non-sovereign God, which would have a subversive rather than a conservative political function.

## **2. The Implications of Non-Sovereignty?**

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<sup>2</sup> David Wood, 'Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard', in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 53-74 (p. 62).

<sup>3</sup> Wood, pp. 53-74 (p. 65).

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 150.

Although currently downplayed by critics and commentators, it is clear that Derrida's concept of "a god without sovereignty"<sup>6</sup> has crucial significance for deconstruction thought and for the construction of the 'political'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in a recent article Michael Dillon declares of Derrida that: "His turn to religion may be nothing but, one may then say, a means of resourcing a renewed interrogation of 'the secret interface' between the thought of the divine and the thought of the political. In many ways nothing could be more politically urgent today".<sup>8</sup> In fact, as we have seen, this 'God' is both aligned with the structure of the 'democracy to come', and offers a 'strategic political level' to reformulate the structures of power.<sup>9</sup> Derrida asserts:

I have tried again and again to dissociate two concepts that are usually indissociable: unconditionality and sovereignty... If I think of God on the side of grace, forgiveness, hospitality, unconditional law, then in order not to have to agree with what I call the onto-theological tradition of sovereignty, one has to dissociate God's sovereignty from God, from the very idea of God. We would have God without sovereignty, God without omnipotence. If one thinks of this possibility of the name of God being dissociated from the absolute power, then this would be a strategic political lever to think of unconditionality without sovereignty, and to deconstruct the political concept of sovereignty today, which I would argue is a heritage of onto-theology.

Tracking and deconstructing the political concept of sovereignty in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida emphasises the persistence of ontotheological ideas in existing political structures, as well as the dominance and oppression which they perpetuate. In contrast, deconstruction looks to provide an alternative to structures based on power and sovereignty; deconstruction, Derrida reiterates in 'Passages', is "the memory of some powerlessness... a way of reminding the other and reminding me, myself, of the limits of the power, of the limits of mastery- there is some power in that."<sup>10</sup> In this context, the concept of a 'god without sovereignty' becomes central. Derrida stresses in *The Beast and the Sovereign* that the model of God which a society holds, even without credulity, influences its dominant

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> John D. Caputo examines the concept of a non-sovereign God at length in John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Dillon, 'Force [of] Transformation', in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, ed. by Madeleine Fagan, Ludovic Glorieux, Indira Hašimbegović and Marie Suetsugu (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 80-93 (p. 7-8).

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of Derrida's interest in sovereignty and non-sovereignty, see Vincent B. Leitch, 'Late Derrida: The Politics of Sovereignty', in *The Late Derrida*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell and Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 11-29.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, 'Passages', pp. 372-395 (p. 385).

structures and its attitudes to subjectivity and intersubjectivity as well as its conception of the role of humanity more broadly.<sup>11</sup> Derrida's reconception of God as non-sovereign grounds his attempt to challenge and reform all of these.

One key expression of this is Derrida's later work on animality and "the question of the living".<sup>12</sup> Here he identifies a systematic misrepresentation of animal life in post-Cartesian philosophy, and contends that this misrepresentation, "the discourse of domination itself"<sup>13</sup> is inseparable from humanity's self-representation and auto-biography. His response is to look for a mode which acknowledges and responds to the "unsubstitutable singularity"<sup>14</sup> of the animal, and to rethink human and non-human agency, *ipseity* and responsibility. As with Derrida's exploration of God, here he looks for an appropriate discourse or mode which would liberate a different way of thinking. Again he registers the insufficiency of philosophy, turning instead to poetry,<sup>15</sup> to "the animality of writing"<sup>16</sup> and in striking similarity to his consideration of God, to "an unheard-of-grammar" which would provide an alternative to "anthropo-theocentric logics and axiomatic".<sup>17</sup> In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida makes a clear connection between his reformulation of 'God' and the non-human animal through the figure of "*divinanimality*",<sup>18</sup> contending that God and "*animot*"<sup>19</sup> are "at bottom the same thing",<sup>20</sup> figures of originary exclusion, and a way of rethinking power structures and relationality.<sup>21</sup>

Andrew M. Koch declares that "The political question for the twenty-first century will center around the extent to which a transcendent, universal form of subjectivity can be

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<sup>11</sup> For a deconstructive account of alternative modes of subjectivity, see: Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Relatedly, analyses of the implications of Derrida's work for animal and environmental studies include: *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. by Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003). Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Matthew Calarco, *The Question of the Animal: From Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Leonard Lawlor, *This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 9

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 52

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> He also speaks of "the finitude of a God who doesn't yet know what's going to happen to him with language", Derrida, *Animal*, p. 17.

removed from the political lexicon”.<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging the extent to which ontotheology permeates our language, and regarding sovereignty as a “prosthetic monstrosity”<sup>23</sup> which propagates structures of domination, Derrida looks instead to new models of subjectivity and interaction. These would begin from a ‘God without sovereignty’, from singularity, difference and alterity, and from new imaginative ways of thinking, responding and ‘post-writing’.

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew M. Koch, *Poststructuralism and the Politics of Method* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007), p. 129.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 52.

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